THE
Eminence
IN
Shadow
02
Daisuke Aizawa
Illustration by
Touzai

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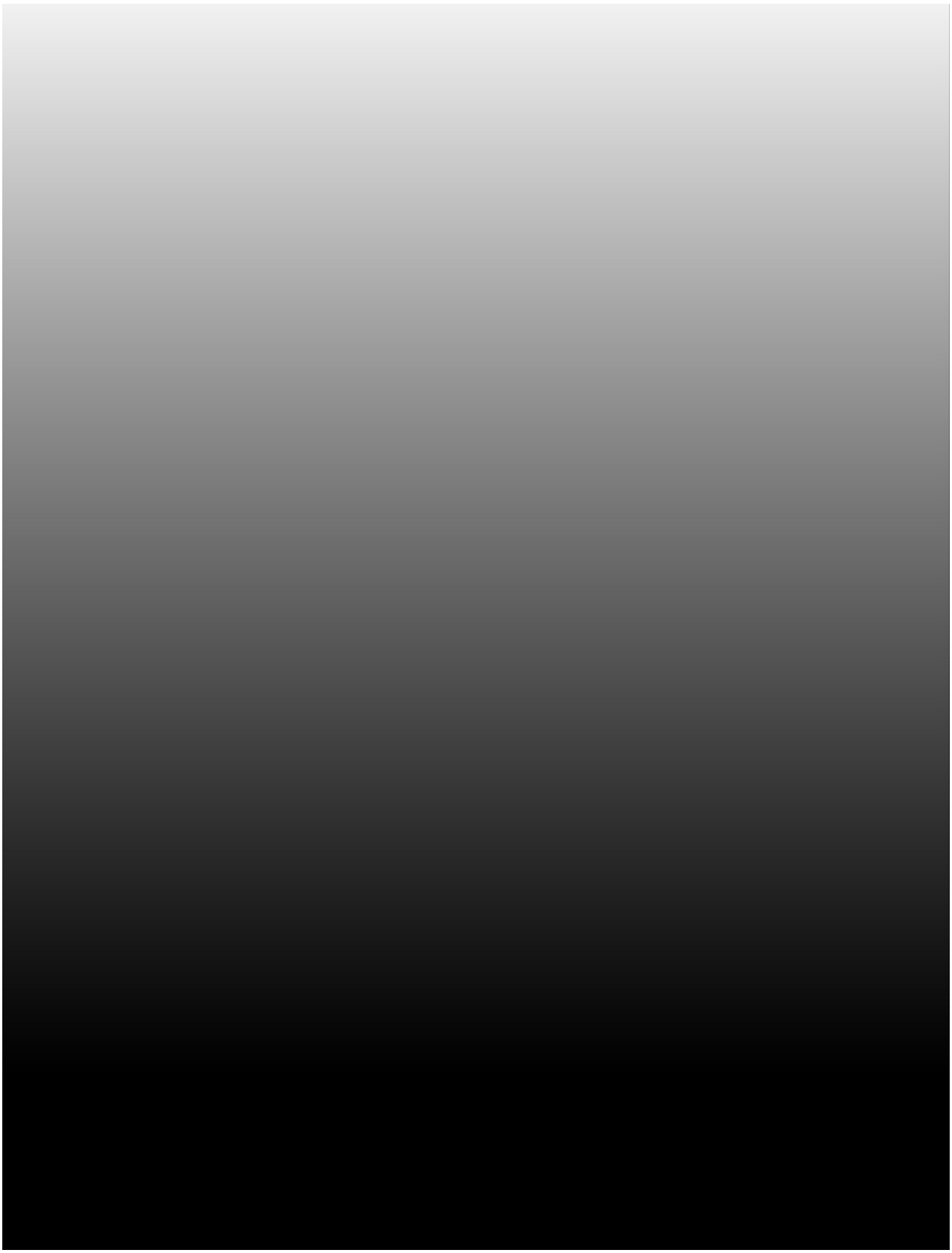
“Ancient memories slumber within the Sanctuary…
And tonight, we shall release them…”



Commence Operation:
A Mysterious Badass Causes a Shitstorm!

Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
The Eminence in Shadow
Alpha
Delta
"I'm good at hunting."
"Did you…see anything?"
Epsilon
"You will regret baring your fangs against the Cult."
The Eminence in Shadow

Annerose
"You'd best give up now... If you don't, you'll die."
Olivier
"There's a beautiful woman bound before your very eyes."
"Do you know of any elves who look like me?"
Aurora
Beatrix
The Eminence in Shadow

"If you have the will to fight…then I shall bestow my strength upon you."
Shadow
Rose Oriana
"Will I be able to change the future… with your powers?"
The Eminence in Shadow

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FINAL CHAPTER Just Who Is This Mysterious Badass?!

APPENDIX

I honestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
All I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as long as I can remember.
[illegible] a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a [illegible] where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the [illegible] they looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
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That was me but with master puppeteers.

The Eminence in Shadow

02

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Touzai

YEN ON
New York

Copyright

The Eminence in Shadow 02
DAISUKE AIZAWA
Translation by Nathaniel Hiroshi Thrasher
Cover art by Touzai
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To Lindwurm,
the Sacred Land!

Prologue

Prologue

To Lindwurm, the Sacred Land!

It all started when Alpha sent me a letter that was only a sentence long.

“Come to the Sacred Land if you’re bored.”

End of message.

Summer vacation had started early on account of the fire damage at the academy, which meant I didn’t have all that much going on. Based on experience, I’ve found that taking Alpha up on her invitations leads to all sorts of fun times. The day after I got the letter, I set out for the destination.

Lindwurm, the Sacred Land. I’ve actually been there once before. It’s one of the holy sites in Divine Teachings, the most popular religion in the world. Their shtick is that the Goddess Beatrix blessed the heroes with strength and that she’s the one true deity.

Anyway, it takes about four days to get from the academy to the Sacred Land by carriage. They’re both in Midgar, so it’s relatively close.

I hem and haw for a little while: Should I travel there by carriage like a background character or just sprint there? I eventually settle on dutifully playing my role and using a carriage. “One must always be conscious of these things,” I tell myself, putting on an affected air of superiority.

If only I could go back in time and punch myself.

I should’ve just run. If I had just dashed there during the night, I would’ve made it in no time.

But because I didn’t, I find myself sharing a carriage with our student council president, Rose Oriana.

The carriage is classy and spacious for just the two of us. After I made my way to a rest stop in my cheap-ass carriage, I bumped into her by chance, at which point she invited me to join her.

I swiftly turned her down.

But I’m no match for royalty. When all was said and done, we ended up riding to the Sacred Land together.

According to Rose, there’s some event going on there called the Goddess’s Trial, and she’s been invited as a special guest.

As I listen to Rose’s explanation, I realize Alpha must have asked me to come so we could watch this thing together.

Somewhere along the way, though, I stop being able to make heads or tails of Rose’s monologue.

“It would have been a tragedy to lose a young man with as gallant a spirit as yours in that incident, Cid,” she says with a gentle smile.

I have a number of rebuttals to this statement: I'm just a nobody, so I'm certainly not gallant, and when exactly did she stop calling me by my full name? Well, at least this part still makes sense.

"When I found out you'd survived, I could sense it was destiny at work. We can only talk about this because the world has granted us its blessing."

This is the part where it stops making sense. First of all, I don't believe in "destiny," and I have no idea what a "blessing" even is. If you ask me, I'd just as soon flip the world the bird.

"Our path together will no doubt be paved with thorns. Nobody will give us their blessing, and nobody will recognize us for who we are."

You literally just said the world has given you its blessing.

"But it's said that, after receiving the goddess's power, the heroes of legend were granted wealth and renown from the people and went on to marry princesses of major kingdoms. So though the path may be harsh and trying, I believe a happy future is waiting at its end."

Is this what they preach in the Holy Teachings or something? Bringing up the outliers of society—read: heroes—to push their agenda sounds super-churchy.

"Completing this Goddess's Trial will mean taking one more step down that thorny road. Afterward, I'll be able to regale my father with tales of a gallant young man."

The young man who's gonna clear the Goddess's Trial sounds like a lucky guy.

"The two of us can travel down that treacherous path one step at a time. Each pace we advance will only serve to deepen our love."

Oh, so like a three-legged race. The spirit of mutual cooperation, huh? That totally sounds like something the Holy Teachings would preach.

"We have to keep it to ourselves for now, but let's try to make a happy future a reality."

"Uh-huh."

Rose offers me her hand, and I take it. I dunno much about religion or the teachings thereof, but if she says it's to bring about a happy future, then I'm on board. Happiness is important, after all. My happiness is, at least.

As I feel Rose's passionate gaze and slightly sweaty palms, I realize I should probably put some distance between the two of us. I certainly don't plan on mocking her for her faith, but it's the kind of thing where both people need to be on the same page. When all the zealots get together and go do their own thing, everyone ends up better off.

"Nice weather today, huh?" I say as I look out the carriage window toward the clear sky and pastoral plains.

When you want to steer a conversation away from a tiresome topic, talking about the weather is always a solid plan.

"Yes. The sun is out, and I imagine it's quite warm outside," replies Rose as she gazes out in kind.

Though the inside of the carriage is shaded, it's still hot enough to make us sweat. The nape of Rose's fair neck is already glistening, and her curled honey locks sway in the breeze as she narrows her pale eyes to keep out the sun.

For a little while, we shoot the shit, talking about stuff like school and the weather, occasionally lapsing into silence as we search for new topics to discuss.

There are several types of silences, which can broadly be classified into comfortable and uncomfortable ones.

Popular opinion has it that lulls in conversation are always unpleasant, but my take is they aren't all that bad. After all, when you realize you're both working in concert to continue to talk, it gives you kind of a warm tingle of satisfaction.

After all, there's only two of us, and we've been in this carriage forever. It's only natural for there to be pauses in the conversation. The fact that we're working so hard to avoid that is exactly what makes it so rewarding.

After the nth pause, Rose breaks the ice.

The afternoon sun has almost sunk, and its light has begun taking on a vermilion hue.

"I suspect there were things going on behind the scenes in that incident back at the academy."

"Hmm?"

Rose turns to gaze at the distant sunset. "Those men in black calling themselves the Shadow Garden must have been in a different organization than that man named Shadow."

"What makes you say that?"

"Their sword-fighting techniques are completely different. All the men in black were fighting with standard styles, but Shadow and the women obeying him were wielding their swords in an usual way. I'd never seen those techniques before. They must be new."

"Huh."

"I told all this to the Midgar Knight Order, but even though I insisted that Shadow and the group in black were fighting, the Knight Order's public statement revealed they view the two parties as part of the same organization. None of their reasons were convincing. I'm certain there's more going on than meets the eye."

"Are you sure you're not just overthinking it?"

"I hope I am. If I'm not, though—if the Midgar Kingdom has the wrong enemy in mind…calamity could be on the horizon. The Oriana Kingdom has launched an investigation, but you can afford to be careful."

I nod.

Rose smiles softly, nodding back.

"We should be reaching the resting town soon. I'll have them prepare you the room next to mine."

"Nah, don't worry about it. I'll just find some cheap place on my own."

“You mustn’t. It’s dangerous out there. I’ll take care of the fee, of course, so please don’t worry about a thing.”

“Oh, no, no, no. I couldn’t impose on you.”

“There’s no need for modesty.”

And that’s how I end up staying in a top-of-the-line room, the kind that costs three hundred thousand *zeni* a night. We go out for dinner at a classy restaurant, pick out chic outfits as we window-shop, then partake in a little gambling at the casino before heading back to the inn. All of it’s fit for a king. The bed is fluffy, and the room is even a suite. It’s awesome.

Better yet, I don’t need to spend a single *zeni*. Maybe the ultimate kind of background character is one who leeches off their loaded friend. I guess there’s value to be found in overlooking a little bit of Bible-thumping.

We reach the Sacred Land, Lindwurm, around noon two days later.

Lindwurm is home to a massive church that looks like it’s been carved directly out of the mountain, and the townscape laid out below it has whitewashed buildings. The main street running through the town is swarming with tourists, and it ends in a long set of stairs leading directly to the church.

After eating lunch at one of our usual high-class establishments, we idly browse the street stalls as we walk down the main drag.

As we do, I spot a little trinket. It looks like the kind of metal key chain with a dragon wrapped around a sword that you’d find at tourist sites back in Japan. I guess some things are the same, even in other worlds. What piques my interest, though, is discovering that it’s not a dragon wrapped around the sword but some sort of sinister-looking left arm. I pick it up.

“Did that catch your eye?”

“Just a little. Why do they all have arms wrapped around them?”

Rose looks down at my hands. Excuse me, ma’am, but it’s a little hot for you to be pressing yourself up against my shoulder. The heat isn’t too bad at this altitude and all, but it is still summer, y’know.

“It’s the hero Olivier’s sword and the left arm of Diablos the demon. It’s said that the great hero cut off Diablos’s left arm and sealed it away on this very land. Up there,” says Rose, pointing up beyond the long stretch of stairs and the church at the apex. “At the top of that steep mountain are ruins called the Sanctuary, and that’s where Diablos’s left arm is sealed. Of course, it’s all just a fairy tale.” She smiles. “It’s a popular souvenir among men.”

“I’ll bet. Excuse me—could I get one of these?”

I buy one to take back as a gift for Skel. Three thousand *zeni* sets me back a little, but I do have the decency to pay for it myself.

As for Po, he gave me a list of junk he wants. It sounds like a pain, so I haven't looked at it yet.

After I stuff the trinket in my pocket, we get back to wandering about. The hustle and bustle of the tourists and vendors all makes me feel kind of nostalgic.

Suddenly, Rose yanks on my hand.

"It looks like Natsume, the author, is autographing books. I'm the biggest fan!"

There's a huge throng of people in front of us. It looks like they're standing in front of a bookstore, but I don't see a sign or anything.

"Would you mind if I joined the line? It might take a little while, but…" Rose looks up at me with puppy-dog eyes.

"Yeah, go for it. I'll wait here."

"Oh, thank you! Care to join me?"

"Nah, I'm good."

Rose buys one of the books from the display, then goes and joins the line.

Left with nothing better to do, I grab one of the books and idly flip it open.

"I am a dragon. As yet, I have no name."

Wait, this is bald-faced plagiarism.

No. Some literary genius must have miraculously had the exact same aesthetic sensibilities in this other world. I pull myself together and reach for another book.

Romeo and Julietta.

I take that back. Definitely theft. And it's not the only one.

Asherella.

Little Crimson Riding Hood.

Some of the many books even have stories ripped from Hollywood movies, manga, and anime. At this point, it all finally clicks.

Someone else must have reincarnated here, too.

I buy a book, then get in line to get it signed by this so-called Natsume.

I just want to find out more about this author.

The line continues moving as I think about my approach, and before long, the author comes into view. It's a little difficult to tell because of the hood covering her head, but it's definitely a woman.

Her elegant silver hair comes down to her shoulders, framing her blue feline eyes and the beauty mark under one of them. Her blouse is open at the chest, letting her cleavage peek out.

"What the hell is she doing?"

It's a face I know all too well. Massaging my temples, I shake my head and try to leave the line.

"Excuse me, sir. Where do you think you're going?"

However, I'm unsuccessful. She must have seen me moments before I recognized her.

The line inches forward, and I eventually end up directly in front of Natsume. The fair, silver-haired elf and I face each other. Yeah, I know that elf, all right.

It's Beta.

"The book, please?" Beta pretends not to know who I am, instead taking my copy with a broad grin on her face.

As I watch Beta sign it with clean, practiced movements, I can't help but ask.

"So how's business?" I quietly whisper.

"Could be better. But I'm gaining quite a reputation."

Oh, I get it. We've got another one.

She's making bank off my wisdom, too.

Back in the day, I used to tell Beta stories from my original world. Since she seemed to be into literature, I figured she could use tales from Earth as a foundation to come up with badass plots of her own, but I never imagined she'd be plagiarizing them wholesale and making a killing in the process.

Dearest Beta, I'm disappointed in you.

I look down on Beta with a frigid stare as she hands me the signed book.

"I was invited here as a special guest, so I've been able to get access to inside information. I wrote the specifics of the plans in the inscription," she informs me as I stand up to leave, moving her mouth as little as possible.

We then part ways without so much as exchanging a glance. This is sweet. It feels like I'm in a spy movie.

Maybe I was too harsh on you, dear Beta.

Upon exiting the shop, I'm greeted by a strangely delighted Rose.

"I *knew* you were a fan of Natsume, too, Cid."

"No, I…"

"I understand. It must be hard to bring yourself to admit it, since most of the fans are women. Nevertheless, even though almost everyone who comes to signings are women, Natsume has a fair share of male fans."

"…Sure, I guess."

"The stories are compelling because they're so inventive! The plots are all so new, their worldview is so novel, and the characters have fresh and fascinating values."

New, novel, and fresh? Yeah, I'll bet.

"And Natsume is versed in so many genres: romance, mysteries, action, children's stories, literary fiction… It's almost like each story is being written by a different person. That diversity is precisely what's allowed these pieces to capture the hearts of so many readers."

That's 'cause they *were* each written by different people.

"Oh, and look at this autograph. I even got Natsume to write my name," says Rose gleefully as she opens up her book. Inside are Rose's name and Natsume the Fraud's signature.

Now that I think about it, she mentioned something about having written the specifics of some plan or other in mine. I flip my book open.

“Are those…ancient letters?” asks Rose as she takes a peek.

“Looks like it. Yeah.”

And I can’t read a lick of it.

“Can you read ’em?”

“I’m afraid not. I’ve had a difficult time learning how to read ancient texts. I can only make out a few symbols. And it seems it’s written in the modern equivalent of cursive, so I’m not sure I could make it out, even if I was fluent.”

“Ooh.”

Awesome, so it’s like a cipher or something. I gave up trying to learn how to read the ancient alphabet, so I’m super-fascinated by it.

“Why write in ancient letters?”

“’Cause it looks cool.”

“It looks cool?”

“Yup.”

“I guess that’s the kind of thing that appeals to men.”

Next, we go check into our super-ritzy hotel, but Rose has to say hi to some big shots or something, so we split up.

She says she can’t introduce me because we’re still just friends from school for now. I dunno what she meant by “for now.” Is she planning on trying to convert me or something?

Unfortunately for her, I have a policy of not getting involved in any religion. The only time I’d consider it is if I was founding one.

I’m the type of guy who doesn’t have many likes or dislikes…mainly because most of those things aren’t worth thinking about.

That’s not to say I don’t have any preferences. None of them are particularly important, and I could certainly make do without them, but I still like the stuff I like and dislike the stuff I dislike. Even when you try to separate those things out with logic, you can’t logic away your emotions.

I call stuff like that unimportant likes and unimportant dislikes.

Incidentally, one of those unimportant likes is hot springs.

Back in my previous life, I had a period when I didn’t bathe. At the time, I considered time spent soaking time wasted. Of course, I had my life as a faceless extra to consider, so I made sure to take a three-minute shower every day, but I eliminated all time in the tub so I could train instead.

This was around the point when I was pushing the limits of the human species, by the way. In other words, I had to make every minute count. I mean, this was during the period when I was seriously planning on repelling nukes with my right straight-hand punch.

When I finally realized I was losing my mind, I went back to bathing. The trigger for that was a hot spring. Hot water fosters composure in the soul,

which has a direct effect on my training. That was the reason I could do the mental gymnastics to realize I needed to find magic or vibrational auras.

Anyway, I'm just trying to say I'm in a hot spring right now.

Lindwurm is famous for them, which is a fact I'd secretly been super-excited about.

It's early in the morning. It happens to be my favorite time to soak in hot springs. I certainly wouldn't decline taking one in the evening, but mornings are superior. After all, there usually aren't as many people around. Sometimes, I even get the place all to myself.

I came today hoping that would happen, but unfortunately, it looks like someone else had the same idea. To make matters worse, that someone is Alexia.

Her platinum hair is all bundled up, and her red eyes go wide as they momentarily lock with mine. We both immediately avert our gazes.

Afterward, we tacitly agree on a policy of mutual nonintervention and go on pretending the other doesn't exist. The spring is designed for nobility, which means few people use it, especially early in the day. That's why all the dividers were cleared away, opening it up for mixed bathing. It's spacious. Everything below eye level is covered by the steam, and the sun is starting to rise. It would have been perfect if I had this all to myself. I bask in the water and the morning sunlight.

Alexia and I are on opposite ends of the outdoor bath with the best view, watching the sun rise in uncomfortable silence.

From the corner of my eye, I see Alexia's white skin move. Ripples spread out across the water's surface.

Bummer, I think. *Guess I'll have to make this dip a quick one.* Just as the thought crosses my mind, though, Alexia breaks the silence.

"Have your injuries all healed?"

Her voice is quiet, by her standards.

"Yeah, I'm all better," I respond, wondering what she's talking about.

"I did fly off the handle when I sliced you up. I'm glad you survived."

"Thanks, I guess."

Ah. Those injuries.

I've spent enough time around her that I can tell this is her attempt at an apology. I'd originally doubted if anyone had actually taught her what an apology *was*, but I guess this is her version of one.

"While we're apologizing for stuff, I'm sorry I suspected you of being a serial killer."

Hot water splashes against the side of my face.

"Obviously not."

"Yeah? So what are you doing in Lindwurm?"

"I'm a guest at the Goddess's Trial. You?"

"A friend of mine told me something exciting was going on. My guess is she was talking about the Goddess's Trial. Do you know what it is?"

I can hear Alexia sigh.

“You came here without knowing? The Goddess’s Trial is a battle that happens once a year when they open the door to the Sanctuary. Memories of ancient warriors are awoken from within, and challengers come to fight them. Any dark knight who applies in advance can participate, but there’s no guarantee an ancient warrior will answer their call. Several hundred dark knights enter each year, but only about ten end up actually getting to fight.”

Sounds interesting. I bet Alpha’s planning on entering.

“How are they selected?”

“Supposedly, it’s based on whether there’s an appropriate warrior for that challenger. Usually, the warrior is a little stronger than the challenger, which is why it’s called the Goddess’s Trial. Ten years ago, everyone was talking about how Venom the Wandering Swordsman managed to call forth the great hero Olivier.”

“Ooh, did he win?”

“He lost, or so I heard. That said, I didn’t see it for myself, so who knows? I can’t even be sure if it really was Olivier or not.”

“Huh.”

Would Alpha be able to call forth a hero of legend? If she did, I bet it’d be exciting.

“And you’re not participating?” I ask. “Word is you’ve gotten strong lately.”

“I can’t. I’m too busy this year. There are some unsavory rumors floating around about the archbishop here, so I’m supposed to investigate him.”

“Unsavory rumors?”

“I’m not going to repeat them. If you want to know, join the Crimson Order.”

“No thanks.”

“When you graduate, I’m ordering you to join.”

“No thanks.”

“I’ll submit the application on your behalf.”

“Please don’t do that.”

“You’re so stubborn.”

At this point, the conversation breaks off.

We sit there in silence for a little longer. This time, it isn’t nearly so unpleasant.

Then, I see Alexia move out of my periphery. Her long legs are floating on the surface, making more ripples in the warm water.

“I’d expected you to be ogling me up and down, but I suppose I was wrong.”

Alexia doesn’t mention what in particular she thought I’d be looking at.

“Someone’s confident.”

“When you’re unassailably beautiful like me, it’s annoying to constantly put up with lusty gazes.”

Big words coming from someone wearing nothing.

“I try to avoid looking at other people when I’m in hot springs. That way, we can all share it in peace.”

“How admirable.”

“And on that note, would you please stop trying to catch a glimpse of my Excalibur?”

“*Pfft*,” Alexia laughs. It’s like she’s looking down on me. “Excalibur, huh? Are you sure you didn’t mean Earthworm?”

“If that’s what you think, it’s no skin off my back. Earthworm, Excalibur, I’m fine with whatever, but let me give you a warning.”

I stand up, making waves across the pool.

“You shouldn’t judge things based on appearances. Sometimes, an earthworm just hasn’t left its scabbard yet.”

And with my goods all out in the open, I turn around and get out of the pool.

“Wh-what do you mean…?” stammers Alexia. Her cheeks are flushed pink.

“When the holy sword is drawn from its scabbard, its ivory blade will be unleashed, sending you on a journey to the Garden of Chaos…”

With that suggestive line, I give my wet towel a strong snap, sending it up between my legs to clap loudly against my butt.

Old geezers do it all the time when they’re getting out of the bath, and I can’t get enough of it. There’s no rhyme or reason to it, but the hot springs experience just doesn’t feel complete unless I do it, too. After a second and third time, I head over to the dressing room.

As I finish changing, I can hear the sound of snapping coming from the hot spring.

The warm lamplight illuminating the majestic cathedral makes it appear more ethereal.

Only one person stands within it: a beautiful blond elf. She's wearing a pitch-black dress, and her blue eyes are fixated on a statue of the great hero Olivier.

She could have been the moon shining radiantly against the dark of the night. Her name is Alpha.

"All we want is to know the truth," she prays, almost as if she were talking to the statue. "Great hero, what did you do at the Sanctuary? Each time we pull back a layer of our dark history, we find more truths and lies interwoven together."

Her high heels click as she begins walking, resounding throughout the cathedral as Alpha walks across its marble floor toward the red mass spread across it.

"Archbishop Drake, what were you hiding? If only you could talk. I really would have liked an answer."

The red mass is composed of blood and chunks of flesh. The corpulent man breathing his last at its center has been brutally sliced to pieces.

The high heels come to a stop atop the pool of blood. White legs extend down from beneath Alpha's knee-length dress.

"Who was it who killed you? Who was it who could easily dispose of a man with your status?"

The dying archbishop's eyes are filled with the sublime light of the grave. Dark rumors about him had reached as far as the royal capital, and he had been likely to come under investigation in the near future. Before that could happen, though, he had been made to disappear.

"Tomorrow, we shall wait for the door to the Sanctuary to be cast open."

After shooting another glance at the statue of Olivier, Alpha turns around.

From the other side of the cathedral's doors, the voices of people searching for the archbishop grow closer.

Paying them no heed, Alpha opens that same set of doors and leaves.

As the sound of high heels recedes into the distance, it's replaced with a throng of the Church's paladins surging into the cathedral.

Though they find the body of their archbishop, not one of them says a word about the blond elf. None of them even realizes she's gone by…

…but the bloodstained stiletto marks continue down the marble hallway.

It’s the night before the big event, and I’m gazing down at Lindwurm from atop its clock tower.

The Goddess’s Trial is tomorrow, and everyone’s all abuzz. Stalls line the main street, and the lamps along the road make it look like a veritable river.

Rose is off at some party at the church. I wasn’t invited. Not that I would have gone.

I smile as my hair dances in the night wind.

I gotta say, I’m loving this whole series of episodes where I get to look down on people and places from on high. The fact that it’s nighttime and there’s an event going on below makes it even better.

“It begins…,” I mutter, getting swept up in the mood. “So… They’ve made their decision…”

I narrow my eyes.

“Then I shall do my part to stand against it.”

In a flash, I transform into my Shadow outfit.

“For that choice is something we cannot allow…”

With that, I leap into the night sky. My obsidian long coat flutters behind me as I make my landing.

My destination is a back alley removed from the celebrations. A masked man is standing before me.

He looks sketchy, so I’ve been tracking him with my gaze ever since he fled from the church. He’s probably a robber or something.

No, wait, I can smell blood on him.

A mugger maybe?

“Did you really think you could escape…?” I ask him.

The masked man shrinks back a step.

“At night, the world dims, transforming it into our domain…”

He draws his sword.

“…and none can escape it.”

The man squares off against me, his sword at the ready.

I leave my katana undrawn, waiting for the moment to come.

Then it happens. As soon as the masked man tries to swing his blade, his head goes flying through the air.

I watch in silence as I wait for the woman behind his corpse to approach me.

“It’s been some time, my lord.”

The woman kneeling before me is Epsilon, the fifth member of the Seven Shadows.

She uncovers her face from behind her bodysuit, then looks up at me. She’s an elf with hair the color of a clear lake, and her eyes are just a smidgen darker.

Beauty comes in many varieties, and hers is decidedly flashy. Her looks are accentuated by sharp facial features, and her figure is exaggerated, too. Her body sways with each step she takes. It’s enough to catch the eye of

anyone, man or woman, whether they're interested in her or not. I know her secret, though.

"A clean slash. Nice work."

"I'm honored." Epsilon's cheeks flush a little when she smiles. Her crisp tone might come across as haughty to some, but I don't think it sounds bad. It reminds me of a piano.

Of all the members of the Seven Shadows, she's the best at controlling her magic with precision. Magic can be super-hard to manipulate when it leaves your body, but she has no problems striking from a distance.

Her nickname is Epsilon the Faithful.

She has buckets of pride and an intense personality, but she's pretty mellow around me. Though she may be quick to jump to misunderstandings, she used to brew tea for me back in the day. She's a good kid and obediently follows Alpha's orders. I know she's the type to respect the chain of command.

Honestly, it's been forever since the last time I saw her, and I have a bunch of stuff to catch her up on. Based on her behavior, though, I can tell she's in Shadow Garden mode.

Well, that works, too. If that's the case, I'd better respond in kind.

"How is the plan proceeding?"

Epsilon scrunches up her face a bit. I bet she's frantically trying to figure out an appropriate plot for our little game of pretend.

"The Executioner of the Cult put down our target. We dealt with the henchmen, but the Executioner in question seems to have vanished."

"I see…"

So an Executioner is in it, huh? I dig it.

"We're switching to our other strategy."

Oh, so it's one of those scenarios where we scrap plan A and place our bets on plan B.

"Very well. But you know what that means…"

"We're ready. We've prepared to make enemies of the Church and for our reputation to be dragged through the mud…"

"I'll act on my own. Don't fail me…"

"Yes, sir."

I cast a sidelong glance at Epsilon as she bows, then exit stage right by concealing my presence and slipping into the darkness.

The Eminence in Shadow

onestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
g as I can remember.
s it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
stermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
aracters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
hind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
airs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
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long as I can remember.
Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

Fun Times at the
Goddess's Trial!

Chapter 1

Chapter 1

Fun Times at the Goddess's Trial!

How disagreeable, Alexia silently mutters to herself.

She's sitting in one of the seats for the special guests, waiting for the opening ceremony of the Goddess's Trial to begin. The seats in question are occupied by Natsume, Alexia, and Rose. There are a number of other guests behind them, but they're the main attractions. It's painfully obvious they're being used to draw an audience as de facto booth babes, but she can overlook that.

There are two things Alexia finds disagreeable.

The first is Nelson. The acting archbishop is busy pompously greeting everyone in the center of the grounds. When she talked with him earlier about the archbishop's murder the day before, he obstinately refused to let her look into the incident.

It all started when Nelson spouted some nonsense about the inspection being called off because the subject was dead. Alexia had replied that made the investigation all the more necessary, dumbass, though she'd obviously used more diplomatic language. Nelson insisted she needed to get her request reapproved if she wanted to conduct an inspection.

Even if she hurried, it would take her three days to get back to the capital, at least a week to get approval, and another three days to return to Lindwurm. Who knows how long it would take Nelson to accept her permit once she actually brought it to him? Depending on his mood, he could easily end up making her wait an additional week. It went without saying that after all that time passed, crucial evidence could be lost forever.

That said, Alexia knew she was acting as a representative of her country, so she couldn't exactly force his hand. Holy Teachings wasn't just practiced in the kingdom of Midgar but in all the nearby nations, too. If she tried to push the issue, she was liable to receive backlash from their neighbors, not to mention lose the support of the populace. Religion made for a handy ally, but as a foe, it was an absolute nuisance.

She glares at Acting Archbishop Nelson as he jovially continues giving his address. *At least grieve a little, baldy*, she silently mutters to herself. The archbishop's death hasn't been reported to the public, but still. Oh, and by the way, Nelson is bald.

Alexia sighs, then glances at the woman in her periphery, Natsume or whatever, sitting to her left.

Natsume is the other thing that irks Alexia.

Natsume sits politely beside her, responding to the crowd's cheers with a broad smile. Her elegant silver hair frames her blue feline eyes and accompanying mole, and her features only serve to enhance her likability.

Thanks to her pearly smile and queenly wave, her lovely appearance, and her graceful conduct, she's wildly popular.

As Alexia looks at her, she becomes more and more certain there's something fishy about her.

Maybe Natsume is the kind of genius author who comes around once in a millennium and maybe she isn't, but the fact of the matter is that Alexia hadn't so much as heard of her prior to that day. True, Alexia doesn't have a shred of interest in literature, but as a princess, she does put some effort into knowing who's who. In other words, Natsume must have only just risen to prominence recently.

For a rookie to have such presence, to conduct herself so well, and to be so popular? *That* is fishy.

She isn't jealous! If anything, it's the kind of hate that arises from being cut from the same cloth.

Alexia knows how to conduct herself flawlessly in front of the public. She lives her life repressing her true self and playing the part of a perfect princess. Most people in positions of power are playing a role in some capacity, but it's hard to come by someone willing to sacrifice themselves to perform the part to perfection. It's a safe bet to say that the more an actor sacrifices to pull off the ultimate performance, the darker their underside.

"Thank you all," Natsume calls out to the crowd. Alexia clicks her tongue.

She finds that soft, ingratiating voice of Natsume's grating. Her exposed chest is too calculated as she stoops over to show off her cleavage… *Well, aren't* you *just the cutest?*

As she internally bad-mouths Natsume, Alexia waves at the gathered masses with an unchanging smile.

However, the crowd clearly reacted to Natsume better. For a moment, Alexia's cheek twitches, and she crosses her arms. As she uses them to push up her breasts, she hunches over. Just a little.

The crowd's cheers grow ever so slightly louder.

Emphasis on ever so slightly.

W-well, my neckline isn't very low, so it's hardly my fault, Alexia silently reassures herself as she returns to her seat.

She casts a fleeting glance to her right, where Rose is smiling happily. She's been like that all morning.

Then, just in case, the princess glances to her left.

In that moment, she sees something: the corners of Natsume's lips curled up in a mocking smirk.

Something inside Alexia snaps.

How disagreeable, Beta silently mutters to herself as she plays the role of Natsume the novelist.

There is just one thing she finds annoying, and it's sitting to her right: Alexia Midgar. She's the vermin who used her position as a princess and a friend to get close to Beta's beloved master.

Everything is fishy about that woman, behaving like a model princess by cajoling the crowd with her sickeningly soft, ingratiating voice and waving at them with that questionable smile. When it comes to women who pretend to be perfect as a matter of habit, it's generally a safe bet they have a dark underside. There isn't a doubt in Beta's mind that her master would never fall for such a wench, but even a one-in-a-million chance is still a chance.

And even if that didn't end up being a problem, the woman was still a nuisance, one whose presence was most unwelcome in the pages of Beta's *The Chronicles of Master Shadow*.

When Beta heard Shadow saved that woman during *The Case of the Kidnapped Princess*, her blood boiled. It filled her with rage that she hadn't been the one who'd…er, wait, uh…at the fact that girl had caused so much trouble for her master. Right. It wasn't jealousy, obviously!

In order to contain her fury, Beta rewrote that section, replacing the role of the victim saved by Shadow with an adorable silver-haired, blue-eyed elf with a beauty mark. She stayed up late at night reading and rereading that section over and over.

But now, the harlot was threatening to barge in on *The Chronicles of Master Shadow* again. Beta was more powerful, more beautiful, and more devoted to her master, so what did that woman think she was doing butting in? I-it was ridiculous!

As Beta internally spews vitriol at that vulgar princess, she responds to the crowd's cheers on autopilot.

When she snatches a glance to the side, she sees, of all things, that tawdry princess trying to push up her shoddy chest to curry favor with the masses.

How sickening.

And besides, those things don't come close to hers in terms of volume. They're totally average.

Thoroughly pleased at herself for emerging victorious yet again, Beta glances down at her voluminous cleavage and lets out a little snort.

Oops. Did Alexia hear that?

Beta turns away to play dumb, which is exactly when a sharp pain shoots through her right foot.

"Ah…?!" She stifles her yelp and looks down to discover Alexia's heel being driven into her foot.

As she strains to keep herself from snapping, Beta calmly addresses her.

"Excuse me, Princess Alexia, but would you please move your foot?"

Alexia stares fixedly at Beta as she removes her heel, feigning that she only just realized what she was doing. Then, without so much as an apology, she even has the nerve to let out a little laugh.

You absolute piece of shiiiit!! Beta is about to scream out loud, but between her devotion to her master and her loyalty to the Shadow Garden, she manages to rein herself in.

Only barely.

A drop of blood trickles from Beta's lip.

Rose just keeps on happily smiling.

I gaze out vacantly over the Goddess's Trial from the stands.

It's the middle of the day, so things have only just gotten started. They're still giving speeches, introducing the guests, and marching in the parade. The main event, the actual Trial, isn't slated to start until after sundown.

Currently, I'm just in the bleachers as another face in the crowd. I let out a sigh, looking at the three girls all getting along in the guest box.

I wanna *do* something.

Specifically, something shadowbrokery. Resigning myself to the role of a normal spectator during an awesome event is killing me.

Like, I should be partaking in that standard trope where I participate in the Trial myself while keeping my identity hidden or something.

You know, the bit where I make some huge display of my powers, and everyone goes, *Who* is *that guy?!*

If this were a tournament, that would be sweet. Unfortunately, though, everyone only gets one round here, and after some research, I found out it'd be pretty hard to nab a slot while keeping my identity under wraps. I consider barging in by force, but I figure I'd rather save that for something more important.

As I wrestle with one nonstarter of an idea after another, the event gradually proceeds.

Sometimes that's just how it goes. I couldn't think of a decent plan yesterday, and it's not like I was expecting some convenient stroke of genius to strike me on the spot. And even though it sorta feels like I'm giving up, I'll still be able to enjoy myself in the normie way. This world is short on big events, so I find myself able to have a surprisingly good time. I even manage to gamble my way into a little pocket money.

Eventually, the sun makes its way down, and the main attraction finally starts. A brilliant light fills the grounds, and ancient letters rise up from the ground in the arena.

Then the letters release a dome of white light. The crowd goes wild.

Once the challenger goes into the dome, the Sanctuary picks out an appropriate opponent, and the battle starts. That's it. No one in the wings is able to interfere until one side or the other is unable to continue. Apparently, people have even died.

The whole bit about being forced to fight until one party literally can't anymore makes me reevaluate the merits of playing a background character through this event. There is a real risk that my true strength could be discovered if I enter.

Meanwhile, the first challenger steps into the dome after the introductions. He's some sort of tough guy from the Knight Order.

But the dome offers no response.

The man curses as he leaves the arena.

You can't blame the guy: The entrance fee is one hundred thousand *zeni*, after all. And apparently, there are over 150 participants this year.

It makes sense in a way. Passing the Goddess's Trial is supposedly a great honor. You get a commemorative medal, and I hear everyone falls all over themselves going, *You beat the Goddess's Trial? Wow! Here's a job!* to the victor.

As I watch the challengers go up one by one, I find myself wondering just how long it's gonna be until Alpha's turn.

The first ancient warrior who shows up to fight is for lucky challenger number fourteen.

Annerose is a traveler from Velgalta, a country that prizes swordplay, and when she enters the dome, the ancient script reacts and begins glowing. The light coalesces into a humanoid shape—a translucent warrior. According to the commentators, he's Borg, a warrior from ancient times.

The two of them have a fairly ordinary battle, and Annerose secures a fairly ordinary victory. I was pretty pumped up to see what the ancient warriors could do, so I'm bummed at how mundane the fight turns out. Fingers crossed that the next ones will be stronger.

As the event goes on, it dawns on me that I had it wrong. Annerose herself is strong. Eight warriors have been summoned at this point, but she's the only challenger who's won so far. When I think about it like that, I realize Borg must've been a tough nut, too.

The night wears on, and the pool of remaining challengers is reduced to a mere few.

As I feel the event starting to wind down to its conclusion, I hear the name of the next contestant get called out.

"Our next challenger is from the Midgar Academy for Dark Knights: Cid Kagenou!"

Cid Kagenou? Who's that? Wait… That's me!

I'm definitely the only Cid Kagenou who goes to the Midgar Academy for Dark Knights, but…I definitely don't remember signing up.

"Let's give our brave contender a warm welcome!"

No! Stop! Pause!

A wave of applause washes over me. Someone even whistles, and excited cheers fill the stadium.

I'm not liking the vibe here. My cheek twitches as I rack my brain.

Given the situation, I have three options.

Option one: I can give up and go fight. If nothing happens, my position as a nobody is safe, but if some superpowerful warrior appears, I'm at risk of having my powers discovered.

Option two: I can make a run for it. I'm just some rando from the Academy for Dark Knights, after all. Nobody knows what I look like, so it would be a breeze. Unfortunately, I'd piss off the Church. If they complain to my school, I might even get expelled.

Option three: I can cause a shitstorm. Looks like this is my only choice.

I erase my presence, dashing at top speed to find a hiding place. Once I've made sure I'm alone, I transform into my Shadow guise and leap out into the air.

I'm a fervent believer in the philosophy that there's no problem you can't get rid of with an explosion.

And on that note…

Commence Operation: A Mysterious Badass Causes a Shitstorm!

As I land atop the domed platform, my long coat flutters behind me.

"My name is Shadow. I lurk in the darkness and hunt down shadows…"

The crowd stirs.

"Ancient memories slumber within the Sanctuary…"

The ancient script reacts and begins forming a humanoid shape.

"And tonight, we shall release them…"

I draw my ebony katana and slice through the night sky.

Over in the guest seats, Beta's mouth is open impressively wide.

"Shadow!!"

"Shadow?!"

"Mas—?!"

Realizing she's about to call him Master Shadow, Beta frantically stops herself mid-sentence.

Fortunately for her, everyone else in the guest box has their eyes glued to Shadow, so nobody hears her. Alexia, Rose, and even Acting Archbishop Nelson are visibly shaken at the appearance of a sudden intruder.

As she closes her gaping mouth, Beta begins thinking. This wasn't part of the plan.

At the same time, though, she realizes something. She knows her beloved master would never take such measures without good cause. There

must be some key reason for his actions, and it's her job as his backup to figure out what it is.

A moment later, Beta is calm and collected again.

What should she do?

What's the best course?

"I see. So that's Shadow," murmurs Nelson. "I don't know what he's trying to do, but the Church's paladins are stationed all around the arena. You've overestimated yourself, fool. We won't let you escape."

Nelson gives the order for the paladins to assemble.

These are knights chosen from baptism to protect the Church. Normal knights can't even begin to compare to their strength. Back when she was a kid, Beta found herself struggling to take one down in the process of saving a "Compatible." Nowadays, of course, she would never let something so unseemly happen.

"Why is Shadow here…?" mutters Alexia.

"Is *he* okay? I hope he doesn't get needlessly caught up in all this…," says Rose. Keeping one eye on Shadow, she restlessly surveys the area.

Suddenly, the arena is flooded in white.

The ancient letters flash, then coalesce into the shape of a warrior.

Beta puts together the minute description listed in the ancient letters and reads it aloud.

"Aurora the Calamity Witch…"

"Aurora? Impossible…"

Beta's and Nelson's voices overlap.

When the light dies down, a woman stands in its place. Her hair is long and black, and her eyes are a vivid shade of violet. She wears a thin black robe, and her dark-purple dress and pale skin are almost translucent. She has an artistic beauty to her, as though she were a sculpture come to life.

"Aurora? Who's that?" Alexia asks Nelson, deliberately ignoring Beta.

"She's the Calamity Witch. Long ago, she rained chaos and destruction down on our world."

"The Calamity Witch… I've never heard of her."

"Neither have I. Miss Natsume, you suggested that you had?" asks Rose.

"Yes, but little more than her name alone," replies Beta.

Which was the truth.

Aurora the Calamity Witch. Each time Beta finds out more about ancient history, Aurora's name invariably shows up. Even so, she still has no idea what kind of chaos Aurora sowed or the destruction she wrought. Other than the mysteries surrounding Diablos, her history is the one the Shadow Garden is putting the most effort into researching.

And now, she's here in person. This is a massive breakthrough. Beta withdraws her notepad from the gap in her cleavage, then jots down a hasty sketch of Aurora. Then she sketches Shadow squaring off against her. She spends considerably more time on the latter.

"Gathering ideas for your novels?" Rose comments.

"…Something along those lines."

After scribbling "*Master Shadow was just as sublime as always*," Beta snaps her notepad closed.

"If you wouldn't mind, could you tell me a little more about Aurora?" asks Beta flirtatiously.

Nelson swells with pride. "I can hardly blame you two for your ignorance. In fact, I'm more surprised that Miss Natsume *had* heard about her. Only a small fraction of people are familiar with Aurora, even among the Church," he says with a smile. His gaze never leaves the cleavage peeking out from Beta's blouse. "Still, it looks like we won't need those paladins after all. Shadow's luck appears to have run out."

"Is Aurora really that strong?" asks Rose.

"She's the most powerful woman in recorded history. She could crush someone like him with one hand tied behind her back. Sadly, though, that's as much as I can tell you."

Nelson goes quiet, as if to say *See for yourselves*.

Beta becomes indignant—there's no doubt in her mind her lord will emerge victorious, but that's not to say she's completely free of worry.

Aurora the Calamity Witch was resilient enough to etch her name in the annals of history. If the battle against this foe tires her master out, the paladins might take advantage of that opportunity and…

It's unthinkable…but not impossible.

Plus, enough time has passed for Beta to get a dim idea of Shadow's plan. He mentioned something about releasing ancient memories slumbering in the Sanctuary. He'd taken action to call forth Aurora. There must be some sort of merit in doing so.

If her master has judged Aurora to be the key to all this, then Beta intends to follow his lead.

Beta gently touches the beauty mark on her cheek. That's the signal that indicates a change in plans. Lurking somewhere in the area, Epsilon has probably picked up on her cue. Even if she hasn't, Beta is confident Epsilon will act appropriately.

"It's about to begin."

Prompted by Nelson, Beta turns her gaze toward the arena. There, she sees Shadow with his ebony katana in hand and Aurora with arms crossed and a relaxed smile. It makes her seem so alive and beautiful, it's hard to believe Aurora is composed of nothing but distant memories.

"I find it hard to believe Shadow would go down so easily…," whispers Alexia. Her expression is serious, and she's watching Shadow closely.

Beta finds herself ever so slightly impressed. At least Alexia isn't totally blind.

The air in the stadium is tense. The silence is stifling.

Shadow. Aurora. They continue standing there, staring at each other.

Maybe this moment is critical for them. Maybe they're each trying to get a read on the other.

Finally, with an air of seeming reluctance, the battle begins.

I haven’t felt this way in a really long time.

As I stand facing the woman with violet eyes, I grin beneath my mask.

She’s smiling, too.

There’s no doubt in my mind that she feels the same as I do.

In my opinion, each battle is a conversation.

A tremor in their sword’s tip, a shift in their gaze, the position of the feet… There’s meaning to be found in all those tiny things, and seeking those meanings and figuring out how best to deal with them are what fights are all about.

It’s no exaggeration to say that the most skilled in combat hold the power to perceive purpose in the smallest of actions and prepare a superior response.

That’s why I think of it as a conversation.

With stronger communication skills, you can anticipate further ahead, allowing you to respond appropriately, which they can guess before you can follow through and react, and so on and so forth, in an endless exchange.

On the other hand, if your conversational skills are lacking, or if there’s too big a difference between you and the other guy, you won’t be able to get a dialogue started in the first place.

One side, or sometimes even both, will act on impulse until the fight ends.

That’s no conversation. It’s not even a process. Just a result. In my opinion, if you aren’t planning on having a discussion, you might as well just go ahead and decide your fight with a good old game of rock-paper-scissors. Delta, I’m talking to you here. Her rules let rock beat the living shit out of paper and scissors.

That said, I’m hardly in any position to talk. It’s been forever since I’ve had anything even resembling a conversation.

Unlike Delta, though, I do at least go in *trying* to communicate… It just always ends with me playing rock and smashing in their face.

That’s why this chick is getting me more excited than I’ve been in a while. She’s watching me. The tip of my sword, my gaze, my footwork… While she pretends to smile nonchalantly, she’s watching every meaningful move I make.

I think I’ll call her Violet. My dear, beloved Violet.

For the first few moments, our conversation consists of merely staring at each other.

Bit by bit, we’re learning. She’s the type who likes to keep her distance, and I’m fundamentally the kind of guy who likes to match my opponent’s rhythm. I’m definitely not the type who likes smashing people with my rock.

And because of that, I begin our conversation by ceding the initiative.

After you, I imply.

The very next moment, I yank back my front leg.

As I do, something like a red spear explodes from the ground where my foot was.

I retreat half a step. Gotta say I wasn’t expecting her first move to come from below me.

The red spear splits into two, rushing at me from both sides.

The first step is to observe.

I want to judge its speed, mobility, and destructive capacity.

For these reasons, I dodge the spear on my left, then block the one on my right with my katana. The impact has weight to it. It’s definitely enough to kill me.

The dodged spear proceeds to split again. There are probably a thousand red wires now, and they all look sharp as needles.

Then, they converge on my position.

I gather magic in my blade and sweep the lot of them away, obliterating the red spear completely.

“A swarm of mosquitoes can never take down a lion,” I tell her.

Violet beams with grace. We go back to staring at each other for a bit.

With stronger communication skills, it takes less time to gauge the other party, including their condition for the most part.

I know how this battle will end. Violet probably does, too.

Suddenly, the silence is broken when a series of spears as thick as logs burst out of the ground.

There are nine of them in total.

I’m able to dodge the wide ones, but they can change their shape like tentacles and keep coming—trying to stab at me with spears, wrap around me with string, chomp at me like jaws.

That’s the way she likes to fight: a lethal, one-sided game with those shape-shifting tentacles.

I continue observing. As I watch how the feelers operate, I refine my movements.

By doing so, I’m able to remove any unnecessary motion when I dodge. Full steps turn to half steps. Two moves turn to one.

Even if I avoid them forever, I can’t win, but evasion is a necessary first step to counterattacking.

The less I have to move to dodge, the faster my subsequent counterattack can come.

Eventually, my evasion and my counterattack will coincide.

With a single step, I bring myself directly in front of Violet.

At some point, a scythe appears in her hands. It cleaves toward me.

As I repel the blow with my katana, I kick her in the leg.

A slime sword extends from the tip of my foot and impales her. As of late, I’ve mostly been using it as a prop for when I want to get theatrical, but it’s invaluable against strong enemies as a way to throw them off-balance.

For a beat, she stops moving, and a moment is all I need.

Violet smiles, accepting the outcome.

“I wanted to fight you at your full strength.”

As fresh blood sprays through the air, I whisper in a low voice only Violet can hear.

“Like I said, Shadow doesn’t have a leg to stand on,” says Nelson proudly. Alexia ignores him.

Since the beginning of the battle, Aurora has been pushing Shadow back nonstop. Alexia gazes in astonishment at the terrifying speed of the red tendrils.

Those things are unlike any weapon she's ever seen. They change their form so freely, it's like they're an extension of Aurora's own body. She could probably even extend them out even farther and run an entire group through at once.

Anyone insisting on fighting her with a sword would be doomed from the get-go.

So this is the power of ancient battle techniques. Alexia is forced to admit she would be no match for Aurora.

"He's more persistent than I expected, but the difference in skill is clear."

You're wrong. Alexia silently rejects Nelson's observation.

Although it may look like Shadow is being pushed back by Aurora's onslaught, he hasn't actually tried to attack yet. He's just observing, taking stock of this unfamiliar attack.

Aurora is strong, make no mistake. She's powerful enough to give Shadow a decent fight, after all.

But those red spears haven't so much as touched him yet.

"A swarm of mosquitoes can never take down a lion."

As Shadow speaks, he blasts away over a thousand slender spikes in a single blow.

The red spears regroup into thick poles and rush at Shadow from all directions.

They hum through the air as they rain down on him with enough force to kill a lion, splitting apart and gnashing at him like fangs.

But they just can't connect.

Much to the contrary—with each pass, Shadow's evasions get smoother.

Each time it seems they can't possibly get any more efficient, they do.

Each moment, Alexia thinks the battle has reached its apex, only for it to be overwritten with an even loftier summit the next.

"Amazing…"

"As always…"

Alexia and Natsume whisper in unison.

The truly strong are able to drive their opponents into a deadlock with defense alone. Alexia's instructor taught her that once.

This fight is a prime example.

"What are you doing, you stupid witch? Finish him off already!" Nelson screams in a tone tinged with irritation.

But the moment has passed.

Aurora is no longer capable of stopping Shadow.

The fight was decided in the blink of an eye.

Alexia was only able to make out a fraction of the exchange.

Shadow stepped in, Aurora swung her scythe, and before Alexia knew it, there was blood everywhere.

And the one who'd gone down…was Aurora.

The result was quick and unsatisfying. It was like watching a lion snap a lamb’s neck.

Nobody could tell what Shadow had done or what happened in that final exchange.

That was why it was so disappointing.

The stadium is dead silent, as if that fierce fight never happened.

“Did she…just lose? That’s impossible! She was on the attack!” yelps Nelson.

He probably thought Aurora was the favorite up until the very last moment.

When the tables turn in the space of a single instant, it takes a minute for people to process the situation. Nelson isn’t alone in that. Most of the spectators still aren’t sure they haven’t mistaken the defeated for the victor.

“What just happened? There’s no way Aurora could lose! She’s…!”

Shadow’s ebony long coat flutters behind him as he leaps into the night sky.

“S-stop there! After him! Don’t let him get away!” cries Nelson after returning to his senses.

The confused paladins rouse themselves into motion and scramble after Shadow.

Alexia suddenly realizes she’s been holding her breath. As she exhales, she tries to memorize Shadow’s sword work so as not to forget it.

“His tricks are as astounding as always…” Rose’s voice escapes her like a sigh.

Just as Alexia is about to concur, a blinding light pours into the arena.

The Eminence in Shadow

onestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
g as I can remember.
s it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
stermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
aracters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
hind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
airs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
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All I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
long as I can remember.
Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

Investigating the Sanctuary!

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Investigating the Sanctuary!

Rose narrows her eyes and waits for the light to die down.

A massive white door looms in its place.

“What is that…?” whispers Rose. “Is it opening…?”

It is. Slowly but surely, the door opens, glowing dimly as it does.

It makes for a rather strange sight.

“Impossible… Did the Sanctuary respond?” murmurs Nelson, audibly flabbergasted.

“What do you mean by that?” asks Rose

“As you’re aware, today is the one day a year that the door to the Sanctuary opens.”

“But I’d heard the door was located inside your church.”

“True, there is one in the church. But it isn’t the only one. Depending on who comes knocking, there are multiple doors the Sanctuary can send to receive them. The Unsolicited Door, the Beckoning Door, the Welcoming Door… And until we go in, there’s no telling which one it is,” replies Nelson. His gaze is fixed on the white portal. “Now that things have come to this, we cannot allow the Goddess’s Trial to continue. Remove the spectators from the grounds.”

Upon receiving Nelson’s orders, the officials begin directing the audience outside. The special guests begin leaving as well.

All the while, the door continues to open.

“Don’t let anyone near it!” barks Nelson. Once the door is open wide enough for a person to fit through, he calls out to Rose and the others. “Please evacuate the premises.”

As he does, Rose draws her sword. Alexia does the same, and the two stand back-to-back as they ready their blades.

“What are you…?!” cries Nelson, flustered. When he looks around, he discovers a group of people clad all in black have already surrounded them. Even Rose and Alexia only notice a moment before Nelson does.

A clear, sonorous voice rings out. “Sorry. I’m going to have to ask that you all remain there until the door fully closes.” The speaker is a woman whose garb is noticeably different from the others’.

“You… Are you from the damn Shadow Garden?!”

In her dress-like robe, the woman steps forward from her comrades in black bodysuits and strides gracefully toward the door.

For a moment, her gaze lights upon Rose and Alexia.

Their shoulders shiver, and their spines freeze up, locking them together.

She's strong…!

Her gaze carries with it a terrifying intensity, and her presence is so overwhelming, it feels as if she commands the very night.

Rose and Alexia both consider Shadow to be pushing the limits of strength, but this woman has reached at least his footing. That much they know.

"Epsilon, I leave the rest to you. And as for the two princesses, be good."

"Understood, Alpha."

"Stop right there! I won't let you enter the Sanctuary!!"

Ignoring Nelson's shouts, the woman named Alpha slips through the door of light.

"Oh, that's Alpha…," Rose hears Alexia murmur. She barely holds herself back from crying, "You *know* her?!"

"And what do you intend to gain from all this?" asks Alexia.

"All we want from you is to stand down until the door disappears. Acting Archbishop Nelson will be coming with us," replies the curvy woman named Epsilon.

Hearing his name, Nelson begins panicking. "What are you people planning to do to the Sanctuary?"

"It's not a question of what we're planning on doing but what we expect to find. Do as we say, and nobody needs to get hurt." Epsilon holds Rose and Alexia at bay with her gaze alone. Her eyes are like still lakes, and they're focused vigilantly on the two of them.

She's strong, too. Not to the same extent as Alpha, but she has that intensity to her that only the powerful possess.

That said, if it came down to it…

"If you so much as move, what happens to her will be on your heads." Epsilon clearly senses their hostility. She's looking straight at Natsume, who's been captured by one of the women in black.

"I-I'm so sorry…" Natsume casts her gaze down apologetically.

"Miss Natsume…!!"

Seeing Natsume choking back tears, Rose feels her chest tighten.

Their ability to fight back has been neutralized…or so she thinks.

"We could just abandon her," suggests Alexia quietly enough that only Rose can hear.

"Absolutely not." Rose's veto is firm.

"Honestly, we'd be better off. I don't trust her."

"Absolutely not, I said."

As the two of them argue back and forth, the door to the Sanctuary stops opening. This time, it's swinging shut.

Slowly but surely, it closes.

The group in black enter the door one after another, dragging Natsume and Acting Archbishop Nelson along with them.

Rose and Alexia can do nothing but stand by and watch.

Their foes show no openings.

Not only are the members of the group in black all powerful on their own, they're also working together in perfect harmony. By moving in three-woman units, they're able to cover one another's backs. Even if Alexia and Rose found a chink in their armor, it's clear their adversaries would seal it immediately. The group's teamwork is polished to a sheen.

The door keeps closing.

"No! Please! Don't hurt me!" As she's being shoved through the door, Natsume lets out a pained cry.

"Miss Natsume!!"

"I-I'll be fine! Please don't worry about me!" Natsume bravely calls out, her voice trembling, as she's dragged through the portal.

Rose watches her go with tears in her eyes.

She hears someone mutter, "Fishy, fishy, fishy," but chooses to ignore it.

The last ones to move are Epsilon and Nelson, bound.

After glancing around to make sure everything looks normal, Epsilon makes for the door with her captive in tow.

But he resists, distracting Epsilon momentarily.

It happens in a flash.

A dark shadow swoops down and cleaves through Epsilon.

"Excellent work, Executioner Venom!!" Nelson booms with a laugh.

As Epsilon watches herself get cut, her concentration is at its peak.

Although she was taken completely by surprise, her skills are sharpened to the point where she's able to bend her torso backward to evade the blow. However, this movement gives birth to tragedy.

Epsilon's life flashes before her eyes.

She remembers being an elf of noble bearing, becoming a "possessed," and being cast aside and hunted by her people.

Then, she remembers the day her life began anew.

On that fateful day when Shadow rescued her, everything Epsilon thought she knew crumbled around her, and her life received new meaning.

From childhood, Epsilon was strong-willed. She never once doubted her exceptionality, and her personality was such that she couldn't help but show off her talents.

She came from a well-off family, and her beauty, brains, and martial arts talent were all the pinnacle of her generation.

Though she had an abundance of pride, she always had the skills to back it up.

Perhaps that was the reason.

The day she became one of the possessed, the moment she lost everything, she was stricken with profound grief.

She'd lost her reason to live, but she didn't have the courage to die, either.

On that day, as she dragged her rotting flesh along a mountain trail, Shadow appeared before her.

"Do you seek power…?"

His voice had been deep, as though it were echoing from a bottomless abyss.

Epsilon's mind was fuzzy, and she thought that perhaps she'd stumbled upon a demon.

But she desired power all the same.

With power, she could take revenge on all those who'd forsaken her.

She could torture them to death. Make them regret what they'd done to her.

"Then I shall grant it to you…"

And with that, she found herself enveloped in soft magic with a blue-violet hue.

Even now, she'd never once forgotten its light or its warmth.

The warm, healing light felt almost nostalgic, and before Epsilon noticed it, she'd started crying.

That day, Epsilon had been weak, ugly, and pathetic. Yet Shadow had saved her anyway.

"If you wish to descend into madness amid a world of lies, then do so. However, if you wish to see the world's true face…then follow me."

And Epsilon chased after him.

After losing everything, she'd been hideous. But once he saved that version of her, she felt as though he'd acknowledged her *true* self.

She didn't need class.

Neither did she need beauty nor pride in her talents.

There were other things that were more important.

After discovering the world's true nature and meeting her four predecessors, though, she amended that assessment.

It was true: She had no need for her heritage, but talent was essential.

And her prized combat skills had her ranked second from the bottom.

Furthermore, the slots above her were occupied by monsters and flawless superhumans she had no chance of surpassing.

The intellect she regarded so highly was second from the bottom as well.

The geniuses before her had shattered her confidence.

Even when it came to being well-rounded, she was beaten by perfect specimens and human machines who never made mistakes.

At this rate, there would be nowhere left for her to excel.

Except beauty.

For Epsilon, her looks were essential. Her beloved master was a man, after all.

When she evaluated her attractiveness objectively, she realized she was heading into an uphill battle.

If faces were the only relevant criteria, Epsilon didn't have anything to be worried about, but she had to consider the future. The fact of the matter was, the women from her family had categorically been cursed with small, flat chests.

Just as men lament their forefathers' hairlines, so, too, did Epsilon lament her chest lineage. She knew if things kept going as they were, the day would inevitably come when she suffered a crushing defeat.

And so, when Epsilon encountered a certain thing for the first time, she felt like she'd been struck by lightning.

The slime bodysuit.

It took but a glance for her to realize the possibilities contained within it, and her heart instantly belonged to the suit.

Although she normally hung on Shadow's every word, she didn't pay a lick of attention when he was explaining the slime bodysuit to her. She couldn't take her eyes off it.

She realized something.

She could push those puppies up.

It only took her three days before she could control the slime bodysuit as she pleased.

From that day forth, she wore the slime bodysuit everywhere under the pretext of practicing her control over it, and bit by bit, she added volume to her chest.

The progress went little by little, so as not to arouse suspicion, but a smidgen audaciously, because she was, after all, a growing girl.

Once they'd gotten reasonably large, though, she noticed something.

They felt wrong to the touch.

At the end of the day, slime was still slime. Her boobs felt different from the real thing, and the way they moved wasn't quite right, either. From that day forward, Epsilon observed Beta as though performing reconnaissance on an enemy, and a few days later, she was able to perfectly control her slime to replicate the jiggle and feel of the real deal.

By this point, Epsilon's control over her magic had far surpassed even Alpha's.

Though the others acknowledged her superiority and dubbed her Epsilon the Faithful, she had long since stopped caring about that.

Instead, she observed Beta with a discerning eye, trembling all the while.

How did hers keep growing?!

This called for war: a battle without honor or humanity between the natural and the artificial.

In the end, Epsilon padded some more and eventually emerged victorious. Mankind is a beast that consistently triumphs over the horrors of nature.

However, the price for that victory was steep.

On that day, as Epsilon saw her reflection in a mirror and lost the small shred of pride she'd regained, she realized something.

Her proportions were off.

Much to her dismay, her build was petite and dainty.

However, Epsilon set her mind to work and eventually came up with a solution.

All she needed to do to balance her figure was to make her butt bigger, too.

In the end, though, she didn't just stop at the butt, which she used slime to reshape. She tightened up and corseted her belly. She used slime insoles to lengthen her legs and attain the best proportions. She… It would take forever to list out all the little things.

In short, she used the slime bodysuit to obtain the perfect figure.

It had taken incalculable effort, being constantly on guard without anyone knowing, and in the process, she developed the presence of a detestably worthy rival.

More than anything, though, it had been a display of her feelings for her beloved master.

Epsilon's precision was nothing more than a byproduct of that labor. Her *true* power was the amazing physical protection her many layers of slime padding provided.

The flashback ends.

The swooping shadow brings down its blade.

When it does, the crystallization of all of Epsilon's hard work is lopped off.

The two softest lumps of the slime bodysuit fly into the air.

In that moment, Epsilon awakens.

This can't be happening here…

No…!

She refuses to be exposed for her shiiiiiiiiiit!!

By manipulating the dregs of magic left in the two flying lumps, Epsilon forces them to retain their shape.

To the trained eye, her ability to manipulate magic once it's left her body is enough to take one's breath away.

At the same time, she yanks that magic back to her, instantly adhering the blobs back to their original position.

Maintaining that level of inch-perfect control in the blink of an eye—it's nothing short of superhuman.

As a final touch, she makes them jiggle just the way real breasts would. Such is the power of Epsilon the Faithful.

"Excellent work, Executioner Venom… Hmm?" Nelson takes another look at Epsilon.

She was supposed to have been in bloody pieces, yet she's standing there without a scratch on her.

In fact, quite the contrary.

“See anything…?!”

“Huh…?”

What’s with that terrifying intensity of hers?!

Nelson’s knees start to rattle.

“Did you…see anything?”

“Ahhh… N-no! Nothing…!”

“What about you two?” Epsilon’s question is directed at Rose and Alexia. They both shake their heads.

“Good. Now come.”

Epsilon grabs Nelson by the scruff of his neck and drags him off.

“Ahhh! What are you doing, Executioner Venom?! Hurry up and save me!!”

“If you want the Executioner…” Epsilon leans in and talks straight into Nelson’s ear. “…I already killed him.”

The Executioner’s head thuds onto the ground.

“AAAAAAAH!!”

With Nelson in tow, Epsilon vanishes behind the door.

It’s almost shut.

The moment before it can close, one more person rushes forward.

“Alexia?!”

Ignoring Rose’s admonition, she slips inside the gap.

“Oh, heavens!”

Rose dashes after her and tumbles inside. Immediately afterward, the door clicks closed.

It then vanishes, leaving behind a faint afterglow.

“Ack?!”

Rose lands atop something strangely soft.

Shaking her head and sitting up, she discovers there are two women pinned beneath her.

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“Rose, will you please get off me as soon as humanly possible?”

“Princess Alexia, I would ask you to avoid touching me.”

The women in question are Alexia and Natsume, both of whom are glaring at each other despite their predicament.

The moment Rose stands, the two of them instantly separate and look away from each other.

Realizing the pair are on bad terms makes Rose feel worse.

“You really shouldn’t fight… Oh.” After calling out to them, Rose finally realizes that people are staring at her.

They're occupying a space that's dim and drafty, surrounded on all sides by women in black. Alpha, Epsilon, and the captured Nelson number among them.

"Um, well…you see…" Rose raises her arms, realizing that fighting will get her nowhere. She forces a smile in an attempt to demonstrate she's not hostile.

Beside her, Natsume is cowering pitiably. When Rose decides she needs to take action, Alexia steps forward.

"I'm so sorry. We tripped and fell. And when we did, why—there was a door right there. It really wasn't our fault."

It's in that moment Rose learns that having no shame can be persuasive in its own right.

Alexia is obviously lying, but nobody can bring themselves to expend the effort calling her out on it, especially since she's speaking with the haughty attitude of a demon lord who's conquered the world.

Whatever. Let's just let her have it, they all think as they look at her.

"If you agree to behave, you can do as you please. In fact, you probably have a right to know a few things," says Alpha, shooting a glance Alexia's way. Then, on her orders, the group in black fans out.

"Hooray!" says Alexia as she quietly pumps her fist.

The only ones left are Alpha, Nelson, Rose, Alexia, Natsume, and one other unidentified woman in black. She isn't Epsilon, though.

"What do you people intend to do here?" Still bound by the woman in black, Nelson glares at Alpha.

Beneath her mask, the elf smiles. "It's said the great hero Olivier once cut off the left arm of Diablos the demon and sealed it away here."

"And? What? Have you come looking for the arm?" Nelson laughs.

"That sounds fun, but…that isn't what we're here to find out. We want to learn more about the Cult of Diablos."

Alexia visibly flinches at the mention of the organization. Rose casts a sidelong glance at her and sees her gaze has gone steely.

"What are you talking about…?"

"I knew you wouldn't be able to tell us anything. That's why we had to come see for ourselves, why we had to come searching for the truth—concealed from the very beginning within the shadows of history." Alpha turns around, then begins walking toward a large stone statue. Her heels echo throughout the spacious chamber. "A statue of the great hero Olivier, I see."

Upon hearing Alpha, Rose cocks her head to the side. "Olivier…? Isn't he supposed to be a man?"

She's right—Alpha had referred to a statue of a woman holding a holy sword aloft. She is beautiful, with the fierce divinity of a Valkyrie.

"We have a general understanding of what happened. However, there is still some uncertainty: the historical truths, the real objective of the Cult,

and”—Alpha reaches out toward the statue and gently strokes its face —“why Olivier’s face is identical to mine.”

Alpha turns around. The mask that was covering her face is gone.

“You’re an elf…?” someone murmurs. It’s unclear who.

However, as their breath is collectively taken away by her beauty, they all realize something. Alpha’s face looks like the mirror reflection of Olivier’s.

“Impossible! You’re that elf who… But the possession should have killed you…”

“See? You know what I’m talking about after all.”

“…!” Nelson quickly shuts up.

“We know the truth about the possessed, too. For a cult that wants to control society, that must be quite the thorn in your side, no?”

Nelson looks down, refusing to answer.

Rose can’t make heads or tails of their conversation. However, it looks like Alexia is picking up on a bit, and the things Alpha is saying certainly don’t sound like nonsense.

It’s hard to believe these two powerful organizations are dabbling in archaeology just because. There must be some important reason. The Shadow Garden must have an agenda, and the Cult of Diablos must have one of their own.

The recent attack on her school immediately floats to the front of Rose’s mind. There’s no way that’s unrelated to all this.

A war between two powerful organizations is unfolding in the shadows. Rose shivers at this realization.

If their conflict becomes more intense, Rose strongly doubts the uninformed government officials will be able to deal with it.

“We’d suspected the Cult’s objective isn’t as simple as just resurrecting a demon. However, we aren’t certain. That’s why we came to see for ourselves.” As she speaks, Alpha channels magic into the statue. As her magic surges, the very air starts vibrating.

“…You *are* one of the possessed. Your powers. Did you awaken on your own…?”

When Rose sees the exceptional quantity of magic at work, a chill runs down her spine. If that woman were to turn her power against the nation, it would take an inordinate amount of military resources to stop her.

“There was a great battle here in the past. The hero sealed away the demon, and many valorous lives were lost. Afterward, the demon’s and the warriors’ magic twisted together, trapping all the memories that had lost their destinations. This land is a resting place for those ancient memories and that demon’s wrath. A graveyard.”

The statue begins glowing, reacting to the magic. Ancient letters rise to its surface, and colors start spreading across it.

“Olivier, our great hero, I knew you would answer my call.”

And there stands Olivier, the spitting image of Alpha.

“Impossible… This can’t be…” Nelson’s legs tremble.

Olivier turns her back to them and begins walking. Her destination fills with light, and before long, it illuminates the entire area.

“Now, then. Let’s take a little journey to the world of fairy tales.”

Alpha’s voice is the last thing they hear before the world floods with light.

Upon defeating Violet, I sprinted away from my pursuers, fled Lindwurm entirely, and took refuge in the mountains. Just to be safe.

After deciding the coast is probably clear, I return to my normal getup and let out a sigh of relief.

Looks like I managed to pull it off somehow. Back at the stadium, the only thing anyone’s talking about has to be Shadow the mysterious badass. That nobody from the Academy for Dark Knights must be long erased from the public imagination.

I pulled out all the stops today, so I think I’ll just head back, take a dip in the hot springs, and go to bed. Just as I stand up to leave, though, a weird door suddenly appears right in front of me.

A dirty door is just floating out in the middle of the mountains. Huh. And it’s covered in dark stains. Clearly dried blood.

“What’s that?”

This is dodgy in the extreme. Even I know better than to mess with this.

I turn on my heel.

“Hey!”

I turn around again.

“No way.”

I leap back.

“Are you for real?”

The door is following me…with a vengeance!

It doesn’t matter how far I get from it. It doesn’t matter which way I turn. It doesn’t matter if I do a hundred backflips in a row. The door keeps appearing in front of me.

I guess that only leaves one choice.

“Time to slice ’n’ dice.”

As soon as that leaves my mouth, I draw my sword and cleave the door in twain.

But…the moment I bisect it, it’s back to normal.

I put my katana away and think.

Obviously, I can’t head back to town with this seedy-looking door in tow. It would stick out like a sore thumb.

And what even is this thing? I don’t sense anyone else around, so I doubt it’s some kind of weird prank. And there isn’t anything behind it.

“Is it, like, their version of D—remon’s Anyw—ere Door?”

This door is acting pretty desperate, so if I go in, I imagine this will all get resolved. I really just want to go soak in the hot spring and call it a day, though.

I give it thirty seconds of earnest thought, then come to a decision.

Fine. Whatever. Let’s get this over with.

When I open the door up, I’m greeted by a dark abyss that makes me feel like I’m gonna get sucked in. Praying this isn’t that trope where I die the moment I enter, I take the leap.

I find myself in a room built of stone.

It’s pretty barren. There’s just a door and a woman bound to the wall. Oh, hey, it’s Violet.

“’Sup,” I say to her. She looks at me, and her eyes go wide in surprise.

“…’Sup,” she eventually mimics. “Short time no see.”

“Uh-huh. Hey, are you the one who called me here?”

“‘Called’…? I certainly didn’t intend to do that. I did rather enjoy myself back there, though.”

“Yeah. Me, too.”

“My memories are incomplete, but I’m certain you’re the strongest one in them. If only you’d been around back during my era…”

“I’m honored.”

“So what are you doing here?” She looks at me quizzically.

“A door showed up out of nowhere, I went in, and here I am.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“Yeah, me neither. By the way, do you know any way out of here?”

“I’m not certain. I don’t have any memories of ever leaving.”

“You just came and fought me, though.”

“I was there when I came to. It’s the first time that’s ever happened to me. As far as I can remember, that is.”

“Oh, huh. Well, that’s a bummer.”

I rack my brain trying to figure out what to do.

There is a door, I suppose, but right as I decide to try going through it, Violet calls out to me with her lips pursed.

“There’s a beautiful woman bound before your very eyes,” she says.

I look at her and, seeing her limbs strung up to a crucifix, nod.

“Yup.”

“Would you please help me down for starters?”

I tilt my head to the side a little, realizing I’ve been misinterpreting things.

“Oh, my bad. I figured you were training.”

“Why?”

“That’s how I used to train.”

“…How novel.”

I take out my school-issued sword and free Violet from her restraints. Using my slime sword isn’t an option.

She stretches elatedly, a nostalgic smile crossing her face. “Thank you. It’s been a thousand years or so since I felt this free.”

“Really?”

“Basically. I don’t recall exactly, but it’s been at least that long.”

After smoothing out her thin robe, Violet tucks her silky black hair behind her right ear. I guess that’s how she likes to wear it.

“Now then, let’s agree on our objectives,” she starts, seemingly unruffled.

“Huh?”

“Mine is freedom, yours is escape. Am I correct?”

“Yup, sounds right to me.”

“Shall we work together, then?”

“I’m down, but do you actually know a way out?”

“I don’t. I do, however, know a way to get free. The Sanctuary is a prison for memories, and there’s a magical core at its center. If we destroy it, I’ll be freed.”

“Just you?”

She looks at me from the corner of her eye, smiling coquettishly. “Everything. And you should be able to leave.”

“Won’t that destroy the Sanctuary?”

“Oh, I certainly hope so. Do you mind?”

I turn Violet’s question over in my head. “Now that I think about it, I guess not. Sounds good.”

“Then it’s decided. I imagine you’ve noticed already, but we can’t use magic here. We’re close to the center of the Sanctuary. If we try to practice magic, it’ll immediately be sucked into its core.”

“Looks that way.”

It’s stronger than the doodad the terrorists used when they attacked. When I try to fire my magic up, it immediately vanishes. I’m testing a bunch of different options, but it might take me a while to find a loophole.

“Don’t worry. I’m great at breaking stuff.”

“Love that I can depend on you. Incidentally, without my magic, I’m nothing but a delicate maiden. I always wanted to be protected by a gallant knight.”

This smile is just as impish as the last. For a self-proclaimed delicate maiden, she sure seems calm about all this.

She takes the lead, throwing the door open without hesitation.

“By the way, what’ll happen to you once you’re free?” I ask Violet from behind.

“I’ll disappear. I’m nothing but a memory, after all.”

She doesn’t turn to look back.

On the other side of the door is a sunlit forest. Light streams between gaps in the trees, and beads of morning dew glisten on the grass.

This place doesn’t seem familiar, so I glance around, taking in my surroundings.

“We’re inside a memory,” Violet explains.

“One of yours?”

“I think I remember something like this.”

And with that, she strides forward. I follow her so as not to get left behind.

After advancing through the quiet forest for a little while, we suddenly reach a clearing. Within it, a small girl is sitting on the ground clutching her knees, lit by the morning sun.

The girl’s hair is black.

“It looks like she’s crying,” I observe.

“So it does.”

The two of us approach her.

When I crouch down and look at her face, I find tears streaming from her violet eyes.

“She looks just like you.”

“A coincidence, I’m sure.”

“Why is she crying?”

“Maybe she wet herself,” offers Violet unhelpfully.

The girl silently continues weeping. Her body is covered in bruises.

“So what do we do?”

“If we want to keep going, we need to end the memory.”

“What do you mean?”

Violet yanks the crying child up by the face.

“Crying won’t do you any good,” she snaps, slapping the girl across the cheek.

“That’s awful.”

“It’s fine. It’s me, after all.”

“So you admit it.”

The world rends apart. The sunlit forest shatters into tiny pieces like a fractured mirror, then vanishes into the abyss.

Empty darkness surrounds us.

I can faintly make Violet out in it.

“Let’s continue.”

“Got it.”

We advance through the void in the direction our magic is being siphoned.

It’s the only sensation we have to go on.

I can barely feel the ground beneath my feet, and I can’t even tell which way is up anymore. To test it out, I try walking upside down. It’s kinda like a handstand: feet up, head down.

It works.

Violet casts a lazy glance at me.

“Don’t go peeking under my skirt now.”

“Worry not. I can’t see a thing.”

After proceeding a little farther, we’re engulfed in vermilion light.

“Ow!”

I practically crack my skull, but I manage to break the fall at the last minute.

“This is what you get for goofing around.” Violet looks down at me sprawled on the ground, then extends her hand my way.

“Thanks.” I grab her cold hand and haul myself back to my feet.

We’re standing on a battlefield flush with the light of the evening sun, which is bloodred and shining just above the horizon line.

“They’re all dead.”

The land is covered with fallen soldiers and stained dark with their blood. The corpses continue all the way to the horizon.

“Let’s be on our way.”

Violet begins walking, almost as though she has a destination in mind.

There are bodies everywhere.

As we’re forced to trample over them, dusk descends on the scene.

I dream about a chance to cut loose on a big battlefield like this one.

After walking a little while, we reach the center of the field and find a blood-drenched girl in tears. We stop in front of her.

She’s kneeling atop the corpses and weeping.

Even without seeing her face, I can tell it’s Violet.

“You’re crying again.”

“I was a crybaby. Lend me your sword.”

“Here you go.”

I hand it to Violet.

She stands before the girl, sword at the ready. Her face is expressionless, and it looks almost as though she’s driving her emotions away.

Then, she brings down the blade.

At that moment, I lunge.

I grab Violet by the waist and drag her backward.

“Was that…a corpse?!”

Sounds like she noticed it, too.

One of the soldiers’ corpses got up and tried to cut her down. If I hadn’t acted fast, it would have had her.

“The Sanctuary is rejecting it, hmm…? How troublesome.”

“You mean, like antivirus software going after malware?” I ask as I kick away the zombies.

“I’m afraid I don’t follow.”

“Yeah, sorry. I don’t really know how they work, either. By the way, what happens to you if you die here?”

“I imagine I’ll be back in chains in the room where you found me.”

“That would be annoying. How good are you with a sword?”

“I can muddle through.”

“Sounds like it’d be easier if I just took it.”

Violet returns my sword, and I slash at a nearby soldier.

I cut him in half with a single strike, but more and more of them keep getting up and surrounding us. I quickly give up on eradicating them and instead choose to charge forward and break their ranks.

Violet stomps one of the downed zombies beneath her heel.

“Looks like you’re struggling without magic,” I comment.

“I think I told you I’m just a dainty girl. You seem to be doing okay.”

“Like I said: Don’t worry.”

I swing my sword in a wide sweep and slice apart an onrushing zombie.

“I’ve been able to use magic since I was a baby, so I restructured myself as I grew. My body is the optimal shape for combat. My muscles, my nerves, my bones… I used magic to manipulate them all into their best shapes.”

I take out three in one swing, then, with a kick, blast away another attacking me from the side.

Individually, each zombie is slow. There’s a bunch of them, but I can more or less mow them down.

“How unfair. You’re like an adult beating up children.”

“I’d rather you make me sound a *little* cooler than that.”

“If they held a tournament where no one could use magic, I’m sure you’d emerge the victor.”

“I’ll take it,” I say, but if I have to keep fighting like this, my body’s gonna reach its limit at some point or another. The crowd of zombies stretches all the way to the horizon. Taking them out without magic is gonna be impossible.

Man, if only I could use magic and go hog wild.

I force my way into the throng, running the crying girl through.

“Sorry.”

Blood pours from her mouth, and as Violet and I are swallowed up by the horde, the world splinters once more.

As the landscape shatters, the two of us find ourselves back in the darkness.

“You good?”

“Thanks to you,” Violet responds as I sheathe my sword.

We start walking through the void again until we’re eventually engulfed in light.

We’ve finally reached the center of the Sanctuary.

When Alexia comes to her senses, she finds herself standing in a white corridor. It seems to stretch on forever; at least, she can’t make out where it ends. The walls are lined with rooms like prisons, covered up by iron bars.

There don’t seem to be any lights, but the corridor is bright all the same. It all feels very real and yet disorienting, like a dream.

Olivier takes point and begins walking. Alpha follows right after her, and the rest hurry to not be left behind.

The hero starts off a beautiful adult elf but grows younger with each step she takes, and before long, she looks like a little girl. The young hero slips through the iron bars and crouches down within one of the cells.

“Children without relatives used to be rounded up.” Alpha’s voice echoes through the endless white corridor.

Then she walks on.

At some point, the cells became populated with young children. Boys and girls, humans, elves, and therianthropes—that is, hybrid beasts—are all caged up. They don’t seem to share any commonalities besides their age.

“Here, they were subjected to an experiment.” Alpha stops in front of one cell in particular.

Inside is a girl. She seems to have lost her sanity, raging within her cage as if she’s in pain. She’s banging her head, scratching at the walls, and rolling around on the floor.

Alpha keeps moving.

The girl in the next cell is covered in blood, but not all the damage appears to be self-inflicted. Her body seems to have undergone some bizarre change, causing her skin to tear and drench her body with blood.

Alexia recognizes that blackened, rotting flesh.

“She’s one of the possessed…,” someone murmurs.

“Most of the children died, unable to adjust to it.”

Alpha resumes walking.

The next cell is unoccupied. The only things of note are the bloodstains coating the walls and floor and the handprints of someone plainly pleading for help.

Alpha just keeps going, unfazed.

The rest of the cells tell the same story: children suffering and dying.

“This is horrible…” Rose gasps, covering her mouth. Alexia silently agrees.

There is one pattern to their deaths. The girls’ bodies are falling victim to the possession, but the boys’ aren’t.

“The only ones able to adapt were a handful of the girls.”

Then Alpha stops.

The cell before her houses a slightly older Olivier. She bears no injuries and doesn’t seem to be in pain. She’s just sitting motionless, clutching her knees and staring at the opposite cell.

That cage, on the other hand, is covered in blood. The next moment, however, it’s as clean as though it had just undergone a scene change, and there’s a girl inside. She suffers, then dies. Another girl appears shortly thereafter.

The young Olivier just keeps watching.

“Why are they doing something so dreadful…?” asks Rose, her voice trembling.

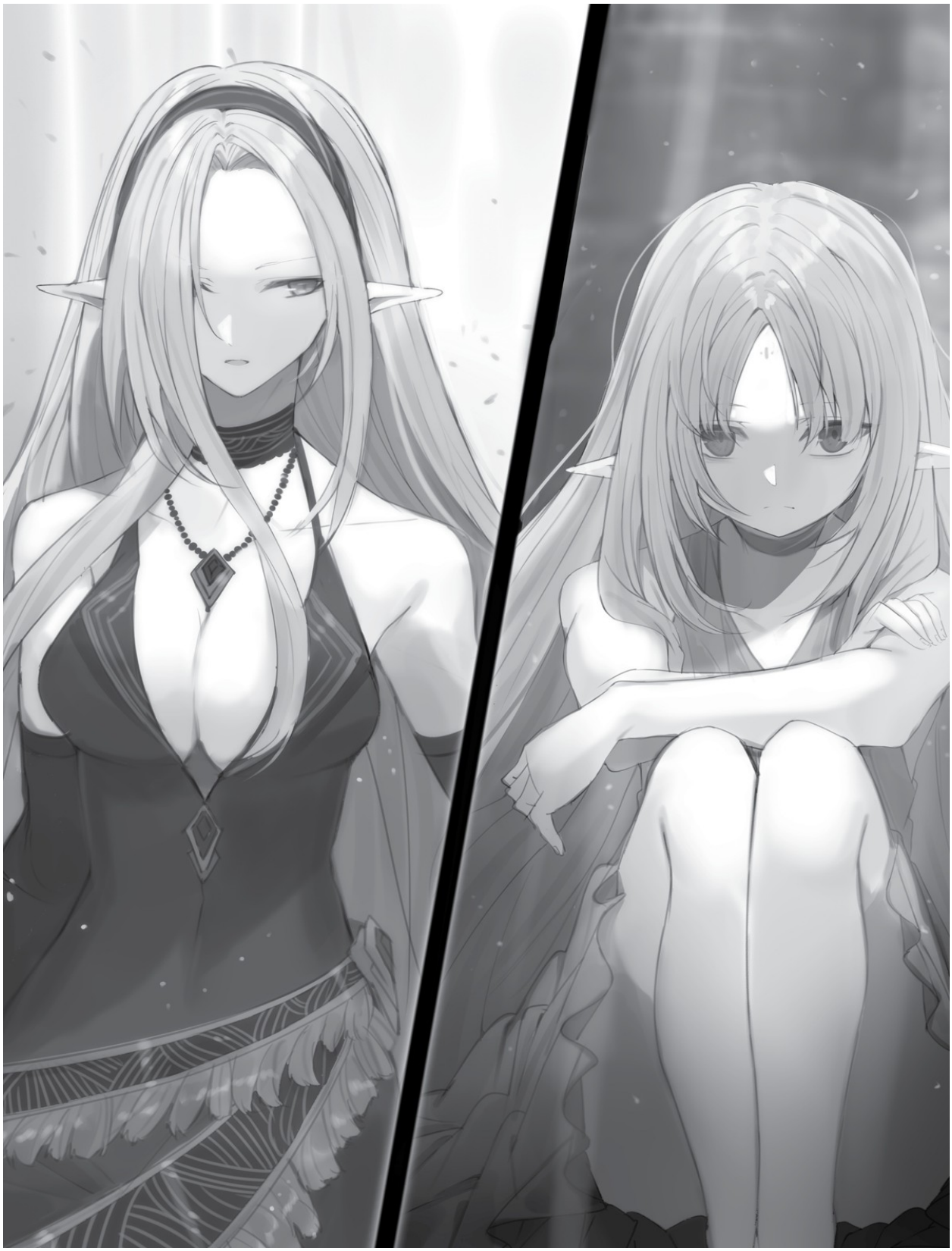
“Care to answer, Acting Archbishop Nelson?” Alpha turns to the man in question.

After turning his head away and faltering for a moment, Nelson quietly speaks. “They needed the power to stand up to Diablos…”

“Or so the Cult claims. Regardless of the truth, though, it’s fact that Olivier cut off Diablos’s left arm. She was one of the few children who could adapt to it,” says Alpha as she proceeds.

“What is this ‘it’ you keep mentioning?”

At Alexia’s question, Alpha stops for a second to answer. “Diablos cells. That’s what we call them, at least. In order to fight Diablos, they decided to try stealing his power.”



“Steal his power…? That wasn’t just a fairy tale?”

“We haven’t seen it for ourselves. That’s how history has recorded it. If you want to think of it as a fairy tale, that’s your choice.” Alpha starts walking again. “After all this time, there isn’t much point debating the veracity of ancient history. We can’t even know if these memories are all true. After all, they fade with time, reshaping themselves to fit their owner’s narrative.”

They pass by caged room after caged room.

As they trudge farther down the corridor, they find more empty cells. Olivier ages, eventually growing into a lovely young woman. Her face really does resemble Alpha’s.

“After she grew older and obtained Diablos’s power, Olivier was given a mission.”

“Slaying Diablos…?” Rose tries to confirm. Alpha shakes her head.

“That’s how the history books tell it, but we suspect that’s a lie. In all likelihood, Olivier was tasked with harvesting more Diablos cells.”

“That’s bullshit!” booms Nelson. He glares at Alpha, his face flushed. The woman in black hoists him up by the scruff of his neck, and he lets out a frog-like croak.

“Even after she grew powerful, Olivier still obeyed the Cult. It’s unclear why, but we suspect it’s because she truly believed that defeating Diablos would bring about peace. That’s why she was cooperating with the Cult.”

Olivier leaves her caged prison.

After putting on a suit of armor and strapping a sword to her back, she sets out on a journey. Seeing Olivier’s face, Alexia finds herself agreeing with Alpha’s assessment.

Olivier must truly have wanted the world to be at peace. Her expression is one of hope and resolve.

As she walks down the endless white corridor, her destination becomes flooded with a blinding light.

“But that wasn’t what the Cult was after.”

Then, the beam drowns out the world.

“The Cult wanted to take all the power for their own…”

The illuminated reality cracks like the surface of a mirror, then shatters into tiny fragments and reveals a new world in its place.

They are on a battlefield, but there are no soldiers.

The landscape is steeped in twilight and littered with corpses, and a group of men in white robes are crowded around a black lump.

Olivier is nowhere to be found.

Alexia and the others follow Alpha and draw nearer.

“What is that…?” Rose asks under her breath.

The lump in question is a massive arm. It’s a monster’s arm—black, thick, and horrifically engorged. Chunks of torn flesh hang off its massive nails.

“Diablos’s left arm. Severed but still alive.”

Just as Alpha said, the arm still lives.

One of the men in white robes accidentally steps too close and finds himself fatally run through by one of its nails. Even though it’s pinned down by chains and stakes, the arm is still pumping out massive amounts of magic.

“Using a high-grade artifact, the Cult was successful in sealing the arm away. However, their seal was imperfect, and its distortions eventually gave birth to the Sanctuary. But, well, that’s a whole other story. The Cult was after the incredible life energy contained within Diablos cells.”

A robed man draws blood and slices away skin from the sealed arm.

After a little while, the extracted blood and skin regenerate completely.

“Thanks to their research on Diablos’s arm, the Cult was able to develop medicine that strengthened humans. It still had side effects, but unlike before, it was effective on men now as well.”

Alpha draws a pill from between her breasts, then flicks it with her nail.

After arcing through the air, it lands on the ground and knocks against Nelson’s shoe. The pill is red, and Alexia recognizes it as a kind she’s seen before.

“The Cult has used these to support their endeavors, but the source of their true strength lies elsewhere. After sealing Diablos’s flesh away and experimenting on it for ages, they were able to come up with another drug.”

The scene changes.

Now they’re in a white laboratory. Men in white robes are crowding around a desk, waiting anxiously.

Finally, a single drop of something falls into a small bowl.

“That shiny red liquid is said to be akin to Diablos’s own blood.”

The liquid does, in fact, resemble blood and emits a vibrant red glow.

The men celebrate and cheer, and their representative imbibes it.

“By consuming that liquid, one gains tremendous power…and an eternally youthful body. It seems our hypothesis was right on the mark.”

Alpha’s gaze shifts to Nelson. He silently looks down, trying to hide his face.

“Now then, does anyone here think the robed man over there”—she points to the man in white at the end of the group—“looks a little like our friend Nelson?”

“…That can’t be!” cries Alexia. She looks at Nelson’s face.

But Alpha is right. Nelson’s face is a perfect match for that of the man robed in white. They’re more than similar—the two are undoubtedly one and the same.

“Would you please tell us the name of this marvelous drug of yours?”

“…Beads of Diablos,” Nelson mutters.

“Why, thank you. However, these droplets were imperfect. They had two major flaws.”

Alexia has already picked up on one of them. In the present, Nelson is bald. But the Nelson of the past…

“Acting Archbishop Nelson used to have hair. It looks like ‘eternal youth’ has some drawbacks.” Alexia laughs.

“That’s not it,” Alpha rebuts her.

Nelson agrees. “Stress made my hair fall out.”

“I’m sorry,” apologizes Alexia.

“The first of the two major flaws is that the pills have to be taken at regular intervals or the effect wears off. Am I wrong?”

“Once a year, yes.”

“I suspected as much. And the second is that only a tiny number of them can be produced at a time.”

“That’s right. Twelve a year.”

“Twelve? That reminds me, aren’t there twelve members in the Knights of Rounds?”

“Heh…” Still hanging his head, Nelson laughs.

“There are twelve knights in the Cult called the Knights of Rounds who have powers far beyond those of its other members. Everyone in the Cult hopes to join the Rounds, seeking the power and eternal life that accompany the title. Isn’t that right?”

Nelson lets out a throaty laugh.

“The Cult devotes resources to perfecting these droplets. The key to doing so lies in the descendants who’ve inherited the blood that runs through Diablos’s sealed body and the heroes. People like me. People who’ve inherited a strong concentration of Olivier’s blood.”

“Precisely. I am Nelson the Avaricious, the eleventh member of the Knights of Rounds.”

When Nelson lifts his head, his eyes are glowing red.

Sensing a surge of magic, Alexia readies her guard.

That’s when a jet-black blade runs through Nelson’s heart. In the blink of an eye, the woman who’d been restraining him has mowed him down.

Nelson’s body goes limp and collapses to the ground.

“Sorry, Alpha. Thought it’d be best if I hunted him.” Her voice sounds somewhat listless.

“Delta…”

“I’m good at hunting. Back at the mountain with the boars, I—”

“Shut up.”

Delta glances around, realizes she messed up, and covers her mouth.

“Now, take a better look at your prey.”

Nelson’s corpse is cracking apart. It crumbles from the ends, then vanishes into nothingness.

That’s not how people are supposed to die.

It almost looked like a mirror shattering…

“He’s coming,” warns Alpha.

Delta’s reaction is simultaneous.

The moment before the longsword can cleave her in two, Delta drops to the ground.

Then, as the blast wave reaches all the way to Alexia, Delta leaps up like a beast.

Her fangs and the sword cross paths.

“What are you, an animal…?”

“I’m good at hunting,” Delta responds to Nelson’s query with a bestial laugh.

Her large fangs drip with blood, and Nelson’s cheek is torn. However, he seems unconcerned as he wipes the blood from his face. The wound has already healed.

Delta extends her ebony katana out as she drops into an animallike stoop.

She’s immediately interrupted.

“Delta. Wait.”

Hearing Alpha’s voice, she twitches in surprise.

“Your ears are showing.”

“Ah…!”

Delta’s animal ears are sticking out from an opening in her bodysuit.

She frantically tries to hide them, but her pale buttocks end up exposed when she does, revealing her wagging tail.

“A therianthrope…,” murmurs Rose.

“Hey, um, Alpha, I feel like my magic is being sucked away.”

“That’s because we’re close to the Sanctuary’s center.”

The one who replies to Delta’s question is Nelson.

“The Sanctuary is *our* territory. The closer you get to it, the more power you’ll lose.” His voice cracks. At some point, his body split into two, but before they know it, he’s back to one again. “I’d hoped to get you all a little closer to the core, but…this will be plenty. Now, allow me to introduce myself again.”

As he effortlessly balances a longsword as tall as he is on his shoulder, Nelson gives a small bow.

“I am Nelson the Avaricious, the eleventh member of the Knights of Rounds. You will regret baring your fangs against the Cult.”

There are no vestiges of a clergyman in his expression. His face is that of a savage warrior.

The scene changes.

They’re now in a space that’s endlessly white. The sky, the ground, and even the area beyond the horizon line are all level and blank.

Alpha and Delta square off against Nelson.

Nelson’s body flickers, then splits into two.

Still crouching, Delta inches forward and slowly closes the distance between them.

Alpha's arms, on the other hand, are crossed, and she isn't even holding her weapon. Instead, she's staring at the two Nelsons, almost as though she's observing them.

"…Hah!" As Delta exhales, she goes on the offensive.

From the way she's stooped over low, she looks like an animal dashing along the ground.

Then, barreling forward, she swings her ebony katana in a wide sweep.

The katana in question is far longer than a person is tall, and her attack has no technique or craft behind it. Just pure, unbridled violence.

Wind follows the force of the impact.

The destructive wave strikes Nelson and sends him flying.

He seems to have been able to block the blow, but astonishment is written all over his face.

"What kind of monster *are* you…?"

Delta laughs.

She's about to go for a follow-up attack, but at that second, Nelson lashes out to stop her. As she dashes forward, a longsword bears down on her from the side.

"One down."

"Wha…?"

As Nelson holds his longsword aloft, an ebony katana bursts through his face.

At some point, Alpha made her way behind him and cut into his body. She slices his neck.

There's no sound. No bloodlust. Just Nelson's head toppling through the air.

Blood gushes from the wound and stains the white ground.

The next moment, though, the corpse shatters like a broken mirror and vanishes into the ether.

"The body felt human—from the way it moved and smelled. Part of how the Sanctuary protects itself, perhaps?" murmurs Alpha as she gazes at her sword, from which the blood has completely vanished, too.

"Precisely." Hiding his astonishment, Nelson stands at the ready. His body splits into two, then again into four. "It seems I was a bit careless. Perhaps four will do the trick."

One of them hangs back, and the other three Nelsons charge.

Delta barrels into their midst.

She doesn't care about being outnumbered or that she's at risk of being surrounded. All she sees is prey.

"So you're just a simple brute…," Nelson chuckles.

Delta laughs, too.

Then, she smashes the frontmost Nelson to pieces, longsword and all.

However, the other two move to box her in, and they level attacks at her.

The two longswords slice through the air horizontally, bearing down on Delta like a pair of scissors closing around her.

With her avenue of retreat cut off, Delta blocks the longsword in front of her with her katana, then twists her neck to turn her head backward.

Then…she catches the blade coming up from behind her in her teeth.

When she brings down her canines, the longsword snaps with a dull ring.

“What…?” Nelson is dumbfounded.

While he’s rubbing his eyes, Alpha kills the two of him remaining.

“That’s impossible…”

Most of Alpha and Delta’s magic is supposed to be restrained. With the power of the Sanctuary, they shouldn’t have been able to control or manipulate it. It should have been impossible for them to put up a decent fight.

Yet even under these restrictive conditions, they downed several Nelsons.

It defies all common sense.

“Did the two of you really awaken on your own…? That technique was supposed to be long lost…”

Alpha replies with a smile.

Delta, on the other hand, seems to be having difficulty controlling her bodysuit. She grabs the slime with her hands, then manually stretches it over her breasts and lower body into a simple suit of bikini armor.

Her face and body are only minimally covered, but Delta nods regardless, clearly pleased with herself.

“W-well, this is totally what I expected from you…” Nelson’s voice trembles a little. “Come, then—let me show you my *true* power.”

His body multiplies.

This time, the number dwarfs his past displays. There are well over ten of him, probably close to a hundred.

“So much *prey*…” Delta grins ecstatically and, sure enough, charges into the fray.

“You don’t even understand you’re outnumbered, you stupid animal?!”

But as Delta and the Nelsons collide, his face twitches.

Several of the Nelsons go comically flying through the air.

“HRAAAAAAAAAAAH!!” Delta howls, which echoes like cruel laughter.

The slaughter begins.

From a safe distance, Alexia gazes in shock as Delta spins her ebony katana like an electric fan.

Delta’s sword work is unlike Shadow’s, and it’s different from Alpha’s and Epsilon’s.

She has no form or technique, simply unbridled violence. It diverges from what Alexia considers strength.

It makes her want to ask, Are you really okay with that?

However, the fact of the matter is that Delta is powerful. Preposterously so.

Alpha joins in as well, and in the blink of an eye, the Nelsons are exterminated.

“How? How could you do that so easily…?”

“You were a researcher, weren’t you?” asks Alpha, sounding oddly sympathetic. “Even with infinite copies, there’s still only one brain. And humans aren’t smart enough to effectively control multiple bodies at once. By the time you get to a hundred, they’re little more than scarecrows.”

Delta slays the final copy. Her tail wags as she strides forward.

“One left…,” she snarls.

A brutal smile is glued to her face. For all intents and purposes, she resembles a bloodthirsty beast.

“Aaah…!” Nelson cries, shrinking back.

“It looks like there’s a limit to how many copies you can make,” Alpha says dispassionately as she watches him.

She’s right. Nelson doesn’t have the strength to produce any more copies.

And that’s why…

…he finds himself calling upon the Sanctuary’s final guardian.

“Come to me! And quick…!”

In response to his pathetic plea, the air rips to shreds.

Light spills forth from the opening, then coalesces into the shape of a woman. A woman who rather resembles Alpha…

“Olivier…,” Alpha murmurs.

There stands the great hero. However, there’s no strength in her eyes. They’re hollow, like glass beads, and appear sad.

She steps in front of Delta, as though to protect Nelson.

Delta laughs.

Strangely, though, she doesn’t charge or inch closer.

She merely surveys her prey through bloodshot eyes, as though making light of her.

“Olivier, the great hero… So you really are…” Alpha bites down on her lip.

Delta licks her lips, wiping up her drool.

But then they’re interrupted.

“Alpha, we’re finished with the investigation!”

A voluptuous woman clad in black appears. For whatever reason, though, she’s a good ways away.

“Epsilon… I suppose that means our preliminary survey is over.” Alpha turns around and begins walking.

“A-are you trying to escape…?!” yelps Nelson, audibly relieved.

“We’ve no interest in taking the life of a weakling. Our objective was to cut off your power at its source. And now, we’re better informed as to the Sanctuary’s defenses. All that remains is to go pry it open.”

“Y-you think I’ll just let you get away?”

“Oh? Will you indulge us in a wild chase?”

“Eek!” Nelson takes refuge behind Olivier’s back.

“Delta, we’re leaving… Delta!”

When Alpha grabs Delta by the scruff of her neck, Delta shakes her off and bares her fangs.

“Grrr!!”

“*Excuse* me?”

With a start, Delta returns to her senses. “Grrr. I’m sorry…”

“We’re going.”

“Okay…”

With her ears tucked down and her tail rolled up between her legs, Delta scampers after Alpha.

“Lady Alpha! Hurry! The exit is this way! Quickly!” Epsilon waves her hands and repeatedly urges them on. Her two mounds of slime jiggle.

After everyone has entered the slit of light, led by Epsilon, silence descends upon the Sanctuary once more.

Nelson sits down and breathes a sigh of relief.

“W-well, no matter. Now I know that Alpha woman’s face. With her blood, we’ll get even closer to completion. This is all according to plan,” he grunts. “F-first, I should report to the bosses. I can say I lured them into the Sanctuary, sprung my trap, and discovered Alpha’s true nature.”

Describing it like that, he’ll be able to cover his ass.

“Then, I’ll… Hmm?”

Suddenly, Nelson notices something off about his surroundings.

“Strange… It seems a little mouse has slipped into the center of the Sanctuary.”

He glances around, and a wicked smile curls at his lips.

“Heh, tormenting it will prove a welcome distraction. Come along, Olivier.”

With that, Nelson and Olivier vanish from the scene.

The Eminence in Shadow

onestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
g as I can remember.
s it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
stermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
aracters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
hind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
airs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
anted to be one of them.
nk of children who worship their favorite superheroes.

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Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
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mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

When Things Get Boring, It's Time for Explosives!

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

When Things Get Boring, It’s Time for Explosives!

It feels like we’re in an archaeological ruin.

There’s no longer that dreamlike sensation that permeated all the places we’d been in up until now, and the cool air brings me back to reality.

The ceiling is high, and magic illuminates our surroundings.

“This must be the center.” Violet turns, surveying the area.

“So what do I need to smash?”

I’m not seeing anything that looks like a magical core. Just a massive door off to the side.

“It’s probably beyond that door.” Violet treads atop the stone floor as she heads for it.

“Makes sense.” I follow her.

The door is so big, it could probably let a hundred people through at once. Okay, maybe that’s a bit of an exaggeration.

Anyway, it’s still a big-ass door.

It looks old as hell, and its surface is covered in dark bloodstains and densely packed with ancient letters. Several chains, each link wider than a human body, are wrapped around it, keeping it sealed.

“We can probably make it through if we cut the chain.”

“Seems plausible.”

I grab one of the links and give it a yank.

No dice.

“Yeah, that’s not happening.”

I might be strong enough to win a magicless tournament, but tearing these chains is physically impossible.

And if I try chopping through them with my sword, my weapon will probably break before the links do.

“You know, there must be a key somewhere,” offers Violet.

“Ooh, yeah, checks out.”

It takes all of three seconds to find.

There’s a pedestal next to the door with some sort of fancy sword stuck in it.

“This is clearly it.”

“It clearly is.”

As expected, the pedestal is covered in tiny ancient letters, too.

“This sword should be able to break the chains,” says Violet as she reads the inscription.

But I know better. A sword stuck in a pedestal? This ain’t my first rodeo.

“But I won’t be able to draw it out…”

“I beg your pardon…?”

“I know these things…”

With that, I grab the sword by the handle and try pulling it out, but sure enough, it doesn’t budge an inch.

“As I thought… I get it now…,” I murmur suggestively. “This blade can only be drawn by the chosen one…”

“What…?!” Violet cries. She frantically traces over the ancient writing on the pedestal with her finger.

As she does, I let go of the sword.

“The blade…is rejecting me…”

I’m just building up the mood here, upping the ante. I’m pretty sure it isn’t actually rejecting me.

But the fact that the chosen hero is the only one to draw this kind of sword is just common sense. It’s a time-honored plot device.

“Only a hero’s direct descendant can draw the holy sword… You’re right, it’s all written here. I’m amazed you were able to read that encrypted magic script so quickly.”

“Heh… I know all the devices…”

“Oh, I see. You designed a device that encompasses ways to encode magical script.”

“Yeah, that. Definitely.” I nod proudly.

Looks like we’ve got a holy sword stuck in a pedestal and a sealed door that only the sword can unlock. It’s clichéd, sure, but I love this kind of setup.

Nice! Now it really feels like I’m in a fantasy world.

“What to do…?” Violet mutters as she sits down on the pedestal.

“Is there another way through?” I ask, taking a seat beside her.

“No leads in writing, in any case.”

“Oof.”

We think in silence for a little bit. We must each be running through different scenarios in our minds.

Finally, I speak up. “Do you want to disappear?”

“What?”

“When we destroy the core, I imagine you’ll disappear.”

“Ah, right. But call it liberation. That’s more apt.” Not looking my way, Violet smiles.

“What’s the difference?”

“This place is a prison, one where memories repeat for eternity. It… pains me.” Her voice almost disappears, like a whisper.

“I see. In that case, let’s just wait a little longer.”

“Wait for what…?”

“If we take enough time, I should be able to do something about the door. Before that…looks like we have guests.”

A sliver of light has appeared in front of the door, gradually widening, until eventually a bald geezer and a cute elf emerge.

“Huh…?”

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. That elf just kinda looks like a friend.”

However, she’s definitely someone else. Her bone structure is different, as are her mannerisms and gait.

“Ah… So you brought along Aurora,” Baldy says as he looks at Violet.

The two of us engage in a surreptitious convo.

“You know this guy?” I ask incredulously.

“Who knows? I don’t recognize him, but my memories are incomplete. It’s possible we’ve met before.”

Baldy laughs. “A shame, really. It’s impossible for the likes of you to breach this door. You seem to have suffered a stroke of misfortune, boy.”

“Me?” I point at myself.

“I don’t know where you stumbled in from, but that witch has deceived you, leading you to your death. At the hands of my Olivier, that is.”

Upon receiving the bald geezer’s orders, the pretty elf strides forward.

The old fogy is just a pushover, but this cutie is strong.

Violet and I have another quiet exchange.

“We can’t… She’s…,” I start.

“I can tell. She’s strong, huh?”

“We have to run.”

“Why?”

Baldy cuts in. “If you want someone to blame, blame the witch, not me. Curse her and your own folly…! Go, Olivier, kill him!”

She readies her sword, which happens to be a perfect replica of the holy sword.

I match her by drawing my shitty school-issued sword. Her eyes are like glass beads, and they’re fixed solely on me.

I can feel my lips curl into a grin.

“Stop! You can’t fight her!”

Why?

Violet’s voice echoes behind me.

The battle begins with Cid getting blasted backward.

He violently crashes into the stone wall, then coughs up a mouthful of blood.

Even though he looks about ready to crumple into a heap, Olivier doesn’t let up. She swings her holy sword and aims for the boy’s neck.

She lops it clean off—or so it appears in that rapid exchange.

By leaning forward, Cid just barely ducks clear of Olivier's slash. Instead, she carves a deep horizontal line in the wall.

Still, he knows her follow-up attack will come quickly. That's why he immediately steps forward, closing the space between them.

However, his resistance ends up having been for naught.

Cid takes a full step to the front, but Olivier's half step backward is far faster.

Because he hadn't finished taking his step, he's defenseless in the face of her strike.

Metal whines against metal, and Cid's sword snaps.

He barely manages to protect himself, but his flimsy sword splits in two while his body bounces and rolls atop the stone floor.

It hardly qualifies as a fight. One side is obviously dominating.

But that's just to be expected.

Technique has nothing to do with it. Her strength, speed, resilience, and all-around power are just fundamentally dimensions beyond his.

Just like how an adult can't have a fair fight against a baby, the end result is predetermined when a young man who can't use magic goes up against a hero who can.

The very fact that it isn't settled in a single blow is practically a miracle.

"Olivier, finish that child off," demands Nelson, clicking his tongue in annoyance.

During the time Olivier stops moving, Cid struggles to his feet. His face is covered in blood from his nose, and when he spits, that's red, too.

He looks at his bisected sword, giving it a small swing to test it out. It's almost as though he thinks he'll have another chance to use it.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Hmm?" Cid responds to Nelson's question by tilting his head.

"You still think you can accomplish something with that piece of scrap?"

"Maybe. I don't have many options, that's for sure."

"What's wrong with you?"

"Hmm?"

"Why are you *smiling*?"

Cid responds by reaching up and touching his cheek. Sure enough, there's a smile there.

"There's nothing I hate quite as much as a man who doesn't know his place. The only reason you're still alive is a stroke of dumb luck," Nelson barks.

With a sweep of Nelson's hand, Olivier bounds forward.

She slips behind Cid with the utmost ease, then brings her holy blade down on him from above.

No counterattack, self-defense, or evasive trick can be made in time.

The only thing he's able to do is throw his body forward.

Blood gushes from Cid's back.

The blow tears his skin and rends his flesh, but he manages to avoid suffering a fatal wound. All he's accomplished is to briefly prolong his life, though.

Olivier advances on the helpless young man once more.

Her strike is merciless, leaving no room for a counterattack.

Blood sprays as shallow wounds etch themselves into Cid's body.

Yet he lives.

"Impossible…," Nelson mutters. His tone carries with it a sizable degree of shock. "How are you still alive?"

Cid checks to make sure no further attacks are coming his way, then forces his bloody body upright.

"Battles without dialogue are empty. That's why I'm still alive."

"What are you babbling about?"

"She doesn't have a heart, so she isn't answering any of my questions." Cid's smile is tinged with disappointment, and his mouth is caked in blood.

"Enough of this! Kill him!" Nelson's eyes are those of a man looking at the deranged.

Olivier springs into motion, but a figure intercedes at the last moment.

"Please stop."

The woman in question has jet-black hair and violet eyes. Aurora embraces Cid's shoulder and helps prop him up.

"What's the matter?"

"Please. You need to stop," Aurora begs him.

She knew this would happen from the very start. The moment Aurora laid eyes on Olivier, she'd known how powerful the elf was.

Aurora's memories aren't completely intact. They only cover about half her life, but even though Olivier doesn't appear in these memories, for some reason, Aurora knows she's dangerous. Despite not knowing Olivier, her heart trembles, almost as if she does.

That's why Aurora desperately wants to stop Cid.

Contrary to her expectations, though, Cid fought.

Maybe he could be the one to…

She didn't stop him in time, held back by that fleeting hope.

But this is plenty for her.

She's been scorned all her life, and not once has anyone ever put their life on the line for her sake. She's made a memory she'll never forget, and that's enough for her.

"There's no need for you to die. I can handle the rest."

Nelson laughs. "What can a witch do without her magic?"

"I can secure his escape at least." Aurora strides forward, protecting Cid.

"A witch saving a human? Wonders never cease. But…if you agree to help me, I could be convinced to spare the boy's life."

"Help you?"

“Indeed. You’ve been oh so uncooperative, and it’s caused us no shortage of delays.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, you’re just an incomplete memory. No matter. All you have to do is agree to cooperate. Don’t dawdle, or I’ll kill the boy.”

Aurora casts a brief glance back at Cid’s face. “Okay, I’ll do it…”

Cid interrupts them, his voice completely free from fear. “Hey, could you guys not start deciding stuff on your own?”

Aurora looks back and glares at him. “I’m doing this for you, you know…”

“I’m good.”

Cid steps in front of Aurora.

“So I’ve been listening, and I’d really appreciate it if you guys could just stop assuming I’m gonna lose. It’s really starting to piss me off.”

“What a tragic young man. Imagine being this oblivious to your situation. To think—if you’d just shut up and done what you were told, I was prepared to let you live.”

“I told you—I’m good.” Cid turns and looks at Aurora. “As for you, just stay and watch.”

“Enough. Kill him.”

“No!!” Aurora reaches out, but she’s unable to stop him.

Cid has already stepped forward and engaged Olivier.

As soon as he blindly steps forward, she greets him with her holy blade.

She leads with a thrust.

The attack cleaves through the air at a blistering clip, then pierces his abdomen.

The merciless strike runs him through.

“Gotcha.” As he’s stabbed, a grin spreads across Cid’s bloodstained face.

He grabs Olivier’s arm, then yanks with all his might. His muscles bulge, screaming as they exceed their limits.

For just one instant, Olivier’s movements are locked in place.

And she’s in the perfect range for a half-broken sword.

Cid’s blade slices toward the arteries in her neck, and Olivier bends backward to evade the blow.

However, doing so ruins her center of gravity.

Tossing aside his sword, Cid grabs Olivier and pins her.

Then he bites down on her carotid artery.

His teeth impale her slender neck, then sink into the vein.

He holds her tight and presses down on her struggling arms as he chews. Each time his teeth dig into her artery, Olivier’s body convulses.

Eventually, Olivier cracks like a mirror. She shatters into pieces, then disappears.

The only one left is Cid, covered in blood.

“I-it can’t be happening… Olivier can’t…! Curse you! How are you still alive after she impaled you?!”

The wound in Cid's chest should have been fatal. No question.

The fact that he's alive is strange, and taking down Olivier in that state borders on inhuman.

"It's so easy for people to die. Most of the time, all it takes is a small blow to the back of the head. And hey, I'm no different. One little knock on my skull, and that could be it for me." Cid stands, patting his wound as if to make sure his body is still in one piece. "But as long as you protect your vitals, you're surprisingly sturdy. You can get stabbed through the chest, but if you protect your arteries and important organs, you won't die. Kinda sweet, don't you think?"

"'Sweet'…?"

"Totally. You can eliminate the time spent dodging before you counterattack. Just punch their face *while* they're punching yours. Rip apart their neck *while* they're stabbing you in the gut. Offense and defense become one and the same, and the tempo of your counterattacks accelerates to its absolute limit. They become nearly unavoidable."

"There's…something wrong with you." Nelson's face scrunches up, as though he's looking at something grotesque.

"Are you okay…?"

Cid responds to Aurora with a nod. "So the elf chick's gone. You up to bat next, Gramps?"

Nelson gulps, clearly flustered. "I—I get it. I never imagined you'd defeat Olivier! You're clearly very powerful. I was wrong. I'm so sorry!!"

Nelson bows, but a chuckle soon escapes his lips.

"…Heh, did you really think I'd say that? Sure, I was surprised a boy with no magic was able to take down Olivier. You're not just a child, even if your victory was dumb luck. But a win is a win. Congratulations."

Nelson raises his head, clapping.

"But don't get cocky over beating a single low-grade copy. You could never conceive of the quantities of magic slumbering within the Sanctuary. That's why it can even do *this*."

Nelson waves his arm, and light floods the area.

When it dies down, Olivier is there.

And she's not alone.

An incalculable number of Oliviers, enough to fill the entire ruin, stand where the light once was.

"This can't be happening…!" Aurora cries.

Cid's wound may not be fatal, but that doesn't mean it isn't serious. There's no way he's in any state to fight.

"This is the power of the Sanctuary!!"

The Oliviers rush toward Cid.

Cid lets out a weak laugh. "Sorry, but…your time's up."

The Oliviers are charging at him from all directions, but…he mows them all down.

"What?!"

It’s unclear when it appeared, but he’s holding an obsidian katana in his hand.

“Where did you get that…? Wait—can you use magic?!”

Cid’s body is bursting with bluish-purple energy.

The magic is so incredibly concentrated, it’s visible. It glitters beautifully, compressed to an unimaginable degree.

“If my magic is getting sucked away, all I have to do is thicken it until it’s too dense to be absorbed. It took a little time, but it’s pretty simple, really.”

It definitely wasn’t simple. Aurora was widely referred to as a witch, but that technique is beyond even her.

“Th-this can’t be…!! How can you do that?! Qu-quick! Kill him!!” Nelson screams, his face frozen in fear.

The Oliviers bear down on Cid once more.

However, Cid stretches his jet-black blade out wide and fells them in a single sweep.

“This isn’t supposed to… Olivier isn’t supposed to…!!”

“I told you—time’s up.”

One after another, the Oliviers attack Cid.

Although the black sword blasts them away, most don’t immediately disappear. After blocking the attacks with their holy swords, they rush back at Cid.

“Man, you guys really are strong, and you keep on coming.”

The Oliviers swarm, and Cid sweeps them back. The pattern repeats itself faster than the eye can see.

Each time, blood drips from Cid’s wound, and his face contorts in pain.

The equilibrium won’t last. That fact is clear as day.

“Ha-ha! Good! Good! Keep it up!!” Nelson laughs, though his face has taken on a scary look.

As Aurora watches Cid’s predicament worsen, tears well up in her eyes. “Please… Don’t die…”

All she wants is for him to survive.

“We were supposed to draw the holy sword, cut through the chains, and destroy the core, right?” Cid calls out to Aurora from the thick of his desperate battle.

“What? I mean, yes…,” Aurora replies, confused.

“That sounds like too many steps. What if I just blew everything up?”

“That would be fine, but…you can’t be serious, right?”

Cid smiles, slashing in every direction.

The Oliviers are all scattered, giving him a brief moment of respite.

He flips his sword to an underhand grip, then holds it overhead.

Bluish-purple energy spirals around him, collecting in the length of his obsidian katana.

“I AM…”

“Wh-what is that?! N-no! Stop!!”

The Oliviers charge.

The one in front strikes with her holy sword.

The full-strength blow pierces Cid’s defenseless chest.

More specifically, it strikes the location of his heart. Covered in blood, her blade bursts out his back.

Aurora screams and extends her hand.

“…ATOMIC. ALL-RANGE ATTACK.”

His chest impaled, he brings his sword down and stabs the ground.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

The bluish-purple magic immediately fills their vision.

The Oliviers vanish, Nelson disintegrates, and the holy sword melts away.

Then, the magic continues swallowing the surroundings.

His attack is an esoteric technique designed to annihilate everything within a small range in all directions.

And on that day, the Sanctuary is completely wiped out.

When he comes to his senses, Cid finds himself surrounded by darkness.

Even when he squints, all he can make out is an endless black abyss.

But amid that darkness, where left and right, up and down, and even his perception of self start to fade away, he senses something floating up.

It's a hideous left arm bound in chains.

It looks like it's far off in the distance, yet if he reached out, it seems almost close enough to touch.

Suddenly, the chains crumble, their fragments cascading downward.

The arm, now free, reaches out as though to grab Cid.

Cid readies his obsidian blade, and the world…is engulfed in light.

It's early in the morning, and Cid finds himself standing in a forest. It's where he was when he first went through the door.

He glances around, but the arm is nowhere to be seen. He squints as the morning light strikes his eyes.

"You got stabbed through the heart, but you seem none the worse," he hears a voice call out from behind him. He turns to find Aurora there, looking somewhat fuzzy.

"I shifted it out of the way. I'm a little tired, though…"

He looks up at the morning sky, sighs, then steadies himself against a tree as he sits down.

"You're just full of surprises. More than little old me…" Aurora sits down beside him, reaching out to touch the wound on his chest.

When she pulls her hand back, though, there isn't any blood. Her hand has passed right through him.

"You're disappearing, huh?"

"It would seem that way."

The two of them sit side by side and gaze at the splendor of the sunrise.

"I was the one who called you there. I'm sorry for lying to you."

"It's all good."

"I lied about other things, too."

"It's all good."

Small birds start chirping. The morning dew glistens in the sunlight.

"For so long, I'd just wanted to get it over with and disappear. I wanted to forget everything."

"Mm."

"But now, I was able to make a memory I never want to forget. Even if I disappear, I hope to carry that one with me." She smiles. "Thank you for giving me something so precious."

With that, she begins fading away. Her forced smile is sorrowful.

"Hey, I had fun, too. Thanks for that."

“If, by any chance, you ever find the real me…” She cups Cid’s cheek in her hand as she speaks, but he can’t even see her anymore.

There’s nothing before him but the silent, lonely forest.

“‘Please kill me,’ huh…?”

Cid reaches up and touches his cheek as he murmurs Aurora’s final words. He can still feel her warmth on it.

Alpha and Epsilon gaze down upon Lindwurm from atop the mountain’s summit.

Alpha’s dress flutters in the wind, exposing her pale legs.

“The Sanctuary has been annihilated.”

“I noticed.” Alpha squeezes the bridge of her nose. “Were we able to recover the holy sword?”

“It evaporated.”

She sighs. “What about a sample of the core?”

“All gone, too.”

Alpha shakes her head. “He chose the simplest, most decisive solution. Very like him.”

“That’s what makes him Master Shadow, after all,” Epsilon replies triumphantly.

“His path is the one we must take.” The morning sunlight reflects off Alpha’s luscious blond hair, causing it to shine. She squints at Lindwurm, off in the distance. “And Beta?”

“She’s guiding the princesses. She says that if she plays her cards right, she might be able to infiltrate their ranks.”

“I see. And the survey of the Sanctuary?”

“We’ve completed everything we still can.”

“What do we know?” Alpha closes her eyes as she listens to Epsilon’s report.

Her head is clear, and she’s able to sort through the information instantly.

“That’s plenty. And what about the other matter?”

“It appears our hypothesis was on the mark.” Epsilon wavers for a moment, then delivers her answer as simply as possible. “Aurora the Calamity Witch…is also known as Diablos the demon.”

Alpha’s blue eyes are fixed on the distant sunrise. “I see… That explains why he…”

Another piece of the puzzle clicks into place.

After Alexia leaves the Sanctuary, she finds herself in a forest.

When she looks around, she discovers Rose and Natsume are standing beside her.

The three of them had all been near each other when they fled the Sanctuary.

Rose tilts her head. “Where are we…?”

“Lindwurm Forest, I think. I can see the town off in the distance,” replies Natsume. The other two check, and sure enough, they can make out the town, too.

It’s impressive that she noticed, given how hard it is to see between the slim gaps in the trees.

“I think we should head back.”

“Agreed.”

Before Rose and Natsume can get far, though, Alexia calls out to stop them. “Wait.”

“What is it?”

“Is something the matter?”

The two stop and look at her.

“Hey, don’t you hate it?”

“What do you mean…?”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite follow.”

Alexia looks back and forth between them. “We were completely powerless back there. But that’s not the worst of it. We couldn’t even tell who was good and who was bad. We were useless spectators who couldn’t so much as make out who was in the right…”

“Alexia…”

“If we keep on this way, if we stay in the dark, then we’re sure to eventually lose everything we hold dear. I can’t be the only one who thinks that, right…?”

“Alexia, the truth is…something’s been on my mind, too. Back when the academy was attacked, I think there were powerful organizations secretly pulling the strings. After all, we don’t know anything about either the Shadow Garden or the ones opposing them…”

“I understand how you feel, but what are you planning to do, Princess Alexia?”

Alexia crosses her arms. “We’re weak and missing vital information, but surely, there’s at least something we can do together. I’m a princess of the Midgar Kingdom, and Rose is the princess of the Oriana Kingdom. You’re an author, so you must have made some connections that way. What say we gather information, then share it?”

“You’ve laid out the beginnings of a plan. What’s the endgame?”

“That depends on what we find, but if the three of us join forces, we can probably fight back or something. Or we can try to gather allies, or…”

“Your plan seems alarmingly vague.”

When Natsume points that out, Alexia glares at her. “Th-that’s why I’m saying we need to gather information, so we can scrutinize it and decide what to do from there!”

“That’s all well and good if you’re *smart enough* to parse intelligence,” Natsume quietly mutters.

“I’m sorry. Did you say something?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Alexia continues glaring, and Natsume flashes a wide smile. The two stare at each other for a little while.

“So what will it be? Will you form an alliance with me or not?”

Rose is the first to extend her hand. “I’m in. I’ll try finding out what I can in the Oriana Kingdom.”

Next, Natsume lays her hand atop Rose’s. “I’ll use my connections as an author to dig around, too.”

Finally, Alexia places her hand on the pile. “Then it’s decided. From now on, we’re allies. We come from different countries and backgrounds, and none of us really knows what lies in one another’s hearts, but I have faith we’re on the same side.”

Rose smiles. “I like the sound of that. Allies trying to lay bare the world’s hidden truths… It’s like the start of a legend or something.”

“We have the roles of hero, sage, and deadweight all present and accounted for,” remarks Natsume, smiling at Alexia.

“With you being the deadweight, of course,” counters Alexia, grinning back at Natsume.

Their pact sealed, the three of them stride forth side by side.

Off in the distance, the morning sun shines bright on the town of Lindwurm.

The vast majority of Gamma’s job is taken up managing the business side of Mitsugoshi, Ltd.

Whether she’s content with this or not, the fact of the matter is that her lack of combat prowess leaves her with few other options.

In truth, she dreams of fighting chicly by her master’s side, but that’s her little secret.

This is what compels her to spend another day dutifully minding Mitsugoshi’s affairs.

Her job has taken her to Madlid, which is on the outskirts of the Velgalta Empire. Currently, she’s in the middle of negotiating with a feudal lord about opening a new storefront for Mitsugoshi.

“Ms. Luna, I personally recommend this property.”

Gamma’s guide, Rude, bears a flashy smile. He’s the eldest son of the lord in question.

Luna is the name Gamma uses in public when she's acting as the president of Mitsugoshi.

"It faces out onto the main road, and it gets great sun. The property boasts a generous frontage. With the land, it comes out to one hundred forty million *zeni*, but as a special favor, I'm prepared to let it go for one hundred twenty. We would be overjoyed to have Mitsugoshi here."

"I see."

The man is right; the plot is excellent. The building isn't bad, either. It's a bit on the older side, but it's three stories tall, spacious, and sturdily built.

A little remodeling is all it would take to establish a usable storefront. Demolishing the old and constructing a new building is another option. Most of the property's value is in its location, after all.

However, the problem lies in the fact that he's willing to give up a prime piece of real estate for a mere 120 million *zeni*.

An identical plot in the capital of the Midgar Kingdom would easily run ten times that, and even in other similar provincial areas, it would probably go for five times more.

However, there's a perfectly good reason this bargain is still on the market.

The issue isn't the plot but the town as a whole.

Madlid is a minor region of the Velgalta Empire, and to be blunt, its population is in decline. There are all sorts of reasons for that, but of them, two are most prominent.

The first is its location. It's horrible.

It takes over a month for a carriage fully loaded with goods to get from Madlid to the next closest town. Considering the time and cost involved, it quickly becomes clear why the town is ill-suited for commerce.

The second is that the imperial capital of Velgalta is experiencing a new wave of prosperity, drawing all of Madlid's youth and merchants to uproot their lives and move there.

Well, much of this is due to Mitsugoshi opening up a branch in the capital and the subsequent redevelopment, but both she and Rude are avoiding making any allusions to that fact.

Anyhow, for these reasons, Madlid as a town is rather short on merit.

Furthermore, firms are the only ones who would want to buy such a ridiculously large parcel of land off the town's main drag. Similar lots could be found all over town.

In other words, opening a new store is financial suicide unless you can come up with a way to solve those fundamental problems.

"We would *love* it if you opened a store here!"

Rude is visibly desperate. He had, of course, heard rumors about the effect Mitsugoshi had on the imperial capital.

If the retailer opened a store in Madlid, it would stop the city's population from dwindling further, and the graph of their failing financial

situation would suddenly soar—or at least, that is what Rude has deluded himself into thinking.

That's not how it'd actually go down.

Until the underlying problems were solved, a new branch would be nothing more than a drop in the bucket.

"Should I…?"

"I—I hear you loud and clear. I'm willing to drop it to a flat one hundred million *zeni*!"

Seeing Gamma's indecision, he slashes the price even further.

However, Gamma has no intention of giving him an answer for a reduction of a mere twenty million *zeni*. She's already spent over a week indecisively touring the town's real estate, and she hasn't given him a single definitive answer yet.

She's already seen everything she needs to.

Now she's just waiting.

"—Ms. Luna." And there it is. An attractive young woman dressed in a Mitsugoshi uniform comes up behind Gamma and whispers in her ear. "We've finished the survey."

"And?"

"It will work."

"Is it here?"

"Petroleum? We're certain of it."

"—I see."

That day, Gamma shows Rude a smile for the first time. "I'll take it."

"Oh my, you will?! In that case—"

"In fact, I'll take every plot along this road."

"—Excuse me?"

"I'm saying if you're willing to meet our conditions, we're prepared to redevelop Madlid into the best town in the empire."

"—What?"

"Would you be willing to expand the Nyle River's tributaries and build a canal?"

"Um…yes?"

"Excellent, then let's get started." Gamma begins issuing orders to her subordinate. "Buy up all the necessary land downstream of the Nyle. We're about to have a real estate bubble on our hands…"

With that, they take off briskly. Eventually, only the dumbfounded Rude remains.

He gapes at his surroundings, then mutters, "Oh, right… I have to report to Father…"

—The weak are worthless.

Born and raised a therianthrope, she had this lesson drilled into her by her family.

Her clan was large, even for canine therianthropes, and her father—the chief—had over a hundred children to his name. She had been born to one of his lower-ranked mistresses, so no one expected much from her.

At mealtimes, her portions were meager, and she was always skinny and famished.

When she turned three, they eventually stopped feeding her altogether.

She was little more than skin and bones by the first time she staggered into the forest to hunt for herself. There, she slew a boar twice her size by bashing in its skull, then she drank its lifeblood and gorged herself on its organs.

She realized then that not only could she sustain herself with her own two hands but doing so was surprisingly easy.

Now she knew that was what it meant to live.

Food handed to you was worthless.

It only held value if you hunted it yourself.

After she returned to her village, drenched in her prey's blood, word began to spread.

Even among therianthropes, a three-year-old girl killing a boar was hardly normal.

Yet that was precisely what she had done.

Her senses and physical strength were superlative, and she could even use magic despite never having had any formal training.

If a child her age came picking a fight, she'd take them down in a single blow, and whenever she got hungry, she'd go off and hunt her own food.

Her malnourished frame quickly filled out, and before long, she'd grown into a young girl with fair looks and supple muscles.

By the time she turned twelve, the only person in her clan who could best her was the chief.

It would only have taken a few more years—or maybe even just one—and she might well have surpassed him, too.

However, that never happened.

Instead, black bruises spread all across her body.

She was…one of the possessed…

…and the possessed had to be driven from the pack. That was an ironclad rule.

After fleeing with her disease-ridden body, she began hunting throughout the forest and prowling aimlessly.

She loved to hunt.

Hunting had given her life. Every instinct in her body told her that hunting was what she had been born to do.

Consequently, being driven from her pack didn't bother her much.

As long as she could keep on living and hunting, she was fine with that.

However, the illness ate away at her. Her body rotted, and she gradually grew so weak that it became impossible for her to hunt.

She collapsed by a woodland stream and looked up at the heavens.

“I can…still…hunt…”

She could smell the beasts, sense their footsteps, hear their cries.

The forest was massive, but she could make out traces of distant prey like it was right in front of her. If her body would only move the way she wanted it to, she could hunt them all down with ease.

“My prey…calling out…to me…”

But even though she extended her blackened, rotting hand, all she caught was air.

“But I…can still…hunt…”

Eventually, her vision grew dim.

Knowing she didn’t have long to live, she smiled when she heard a wolf howling nearby.

The wolf had come to hunt her.

This was her chance.

She couldn’t move anymore, but she could lure her prey to her.

The moment the wolf tried to bite her, she would tear out its throat with her teeth.

She stifled her breathing and waited for the wolf to come.

But it never did.

“Wh…y…?”

The wolf’s presence grew distant, and a blond elf appeared in its place.

“It’s progressed pretty far… You must have an incredible force of will to be able to stay conscious in that state,” the elf observed. She offered her hand but was frantically forced to retract it a moment later.

Chomp.

The therianthrope girl’s fangs met empty air.

She turned her inflamed face toward the elf, glared at her, and smiled.

“Looks like…I found…a big one…”

With the last of her strength, she willed herself to her feet.

Animals weren’t the only prey she knew. Strife between therianthrope tribes was common, and hunting foes was something else she lived for.

The moment she laid eyes on the elf, she knew: The girl standing before her was the kind of big game that really got her blood boiling.

“What…?! How can you still stand…?!” The elf girl started to back away.

“Grah!!” That’s when the therianthrope girl pounced at her. No ailing person should have been able to move so fast.

“…?!”

The elf dodged her fangs and retreated a good distance, but the therianthrope forced her unstable body to pursue.

“Stop that! I’m trying to help—! Seems like talking isn’t getting me anywhere. I might end up hurting you, so it looks like I’ll need to ask for his help…,” she muttered, then turned around and left.

“W-wait…wai…t…” The therianthrope chased her for a few steps, then collapsed headfirst.

She no longer had the strength to go after her.

The fight had drained the last of her energy…just when she thought she’d have one last chance to hunt a big one…

Despondent, she closed her eyes.

For a little while, all she heard was the quiet ambiance of the forest until nearby footsteps caught her ears. She opened her eyes in surprise.

Standing beside her was a dark-haired boy dressed all in black. She couldn’t feel his presence at all.

“My name is Shadow…”

When she looked up into his eyes, her whole body trembled.

—She wouldn’t win.

She wouldn’t be able to beat him, no matter how hard she tried.

What told her that wasn’t logic but instinct, and she comprehended it instantly.

The only person stronger than her was her father, the chief of her clan, and even he didn’t scare her.

But this boy was different.

His strength as a living creature was fundamentally beyond hers.

When she saw his toned body, she could tell it was built for combat.

When she sensed his sharpened magical skills, she could tell they were potent enough to blow the entire area to kingdom come.

When she looked at his steely eyes, she knew he could tell exactly how strong she was.

The gulf between their strengths was so vast, though, she couldn’t even muster the will to fight.

She feared his strength and, as a matter of course, obeyed what her instincts told her to do in the face of a mightier being.

In other words—she submitted.

“Purr…”

She flopped over, exposing her belly and wagging her tail.

“She seems perfectly docile…”

“When I tried to get close to her, she was rabid.”

The boy and the elf shared a puzzled exchange.

“Eh, whatever. I’m gonna heal her now.”

“Allow me to help.”

With that, the boy surrounded the therianthrope with his dark-blue magic. The elf awkwardly tried to assist.

“Purr…”

As they did, the therianthrope just kept wagging her tail with her belly exposed.

A little while later, after the first round of treatment was finished, they were joined by two more elves, one with silver hair and one with blue.

The girl wasn't fully healed but had recovered enough to be able to walk around again.

"I'm Alpha. I'm sorry for springing this on you, but I'd like to explain a few things about our organization and your body—"

As the elf named Alpha began droning on about some incomprehensible nonsense, the therianthrope girl examined her body.

Thanks to the Shadow boy's magic, she'd recovered remarkably.

She would never forget the strength and warmth of his magic.

Now, she could hunt again.

"—and because of that, we fight against the Cult."

She didn't fully follow but understood this was to be her new pack.

She had no objections to that.

After all, its chief, Shadow, was the strongest being she knew. To serve the strong was her pride.

As long as it had Shadow, this pack would become the strongest in the world.

On to world domination!! That thought glistened in her mind.

"Delta. From now on, that will be your name."

"Del-tuh… My new name from Boss man…"

She liked it far better than her old name. After all, it was something Boss man had given her.

Boss man was amazing! He was the strongest. As far as she was concerned, he was the best in all the world!

That was why there was something she needed to do.

She glanced at the three elves standing around her. The blue one wasn't even in contention. The silver one was so-so. The blond one, though, was strong.

Shadow was the pack's undisputed top dog, which meant Alpha was surely his number two.

In other words, Delta needed to—

"Hey, Blondie!" Glaring, Delta pointed at Alpha. "From now on, *I'm* number two!"

Fighting to determine pack hierarchy was extremely important to therianthropes.

"Submit and show me your belly!"

"—Ex*cuse* me?"

Hearing that, Alpha's magic started to flare.

Epsilon's mornings start early.

She's up before the sun rises and stands before a large mirror clad in her negligee.

She only sleeps for three hours. However, her master taught her a technique that removes fatigue with magic while she sleeps, so three hours is plenty for her. Ample beauty sleep.

By only sleeping three hours a day, she's able to spend the other twenty-one productively.

She takes care of her training and missions, of course, but her number one priority is self-improvement.

That's why she wakes up early to stand in front of the mirror.

The first thing she needs to inspect are her slime-padded breasts.

Standing before the mirror, she turns the massive slime blobs over in her hands.

Are they bodacious and shapely?

Are they firm yet soft to the touch?

Most importantly, do they look natural?

She absolutely can't let anyone find out about her padded little secret.

They have to be realer than real, more natural than natural. That's the standard to which she holds her chest as she inspects the slime.

After almost an hour of rotating and massaging, she finishes her inspection and fine-tuning.

Next, she makes sure her figure is well proportioned.

Does her waist corseted in slime cast an appropriate silhouette?

Are her thickened hips beautiful?

What about the slim plumpness of her butt, the form of her calves…the length of her legs…?

By the time she's finished all of her checks, the morning sun has long since risen.

She then sheds her negligee, dons a casual dress atop her slime, applies her makeup, and does her hair.

At this point, she's finally fit to appear in front of others.

As the finishing touch, she stands in front of the mirror one last time, twirls, and readies her Epsilon-style Hidden Technique: Master Shadow Come-Hither Pose.

"Beautiful as ever," she sighs with a smile. Her voice is rich with confidence.

All of this is for her master's sake. This is the extent to which she's pushed her daily routine.

However, she holds the Master Shadow Come-Hither Pose longer than usual today. As she maintains the position, which serves to emphasize her slime breasts, an unpleasant smile spreads across her face.

"Heh-heh… Heh-heh-heh… Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

She's smiling because she's reminiscing.

Specifically, she's thinking about something that happened the other day in Lindwurm, back when she was reunited with her master after a long absence.

She'd elegantly dispatched one of the Cult's assassins as she swooped down before Lord Shadow.

Whenever she was reunited with her master, her heart always beat even harder than usual. This time, though, he'd been staring right at her…

…and his fierce gaze had locked on her breasts!

Epsilon's beauty, glamour, and effort had finally snatched her master's attention.

Her cheeks had reddened, but she'd pretended not to notice her master's fervent gaze. As soon as he left, though, her feelings erupted, and she let out a loud victory cry.

"I won! I beat Mother Nature!"

Immediately after, she snapped back to her senses.

This isn't Lindwurm, the Sacred Land. It's her bedroom.

However, the memory is etched in her heart: that fleeting moment with her master's gaze burning into her chest—

"Heh-heh! Heh-heh-heh…"

Finally, she releases the Master Shadow Come-Hither Pose. However, the wicked smile is still plastered on her lips.

That day, that moment, was unmistakably the pinnacle of her life.

Simply thinking back to it, she can return to the peak of her existence.

She feels like a phoenix, coming back again and again…

Thus, Epsilon's day once again begins at its zenith.

After leaving her bedroom, Epsilon walks down the hallway and runs into Beta for the first time in a while.

They trade superficially amiable greetings.

"Good morning, Beta."

"Good morning, Epsilon."

The exchange is casual. However, neither looks at her comrade-in-arms' face for so much as an instant.

Their gazes are focused elsewhere—each other's breasts.

Each of their chests sticks out like a pair of rockets, and they stare at their opponent's assets as if gazing upon an archnemesis.

Then, they both thrust out their chests.

Each sucks in as much air as they possibly can, projecting their breasts forward to their absolute limit.

This is a battle neither woman is willing to lose.

The protruding boobs and slime smash into each other, then wobble.

"Heh-heh…"

"Rrr…"

Once again, the victor is Epsilon. After all, she's shaped her slime specifically to beat Beta.

Originally, their battle had been one-sided hostility on Epsilon's part.

However, as Epsilon used her slime to push up and pad, a sense of rivalry took root in Beta, and today, Epsilon isn't the only one with something black and ugly stuffed in her chest.

Still, they *are* teammates.

They've suffered through difficult training and fought side by side, and the two of them definitely share a sense of comradery.

Each trusts and considers the other important.

Most of the time, they're able to get along peacefully.

Key word: most of the time.

Normally, after exchanging greetings, they simply pass by and continue on their ways. Having spent countless hours together since childhood, they feel little need to share prolonged pleasantries.

However, today is different.

Epsilon's mountainous pride refuses to simply let her rival walk off in silence.

"You know, something surprising happened to me recently…"

"What could that be?"

Epsilon breaks the ice, and Beta freezes. The boobs and slime continue their squishy collision as the girls talk.

"It happened the other day, during the mission in the Sacred Land… I felt our lord's gaze burning a hole in me…"

"What?!"

"I felt his hot gaze…focused…right…*here*…" Epsilon's cheeks redden, and she fidgets restlessly as she speaks.

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh—? Th-that can't be! Y-you must be mistaken!"

"Oh, no, it was not a mistake. You should know, Beta. We're very aware when people look at us."

"Rrr… Y-you're right…"

The two of them are both curvy from head to toe, and they find themselves on the receiving end of the male gaze all the time. They've both naturally grown conscious of when it's happening.

"That was what I found so surprising. I never thought he would fix so fervent a stare on the likes of me…"

"Gh… Our lord…? There's no way…" Mortified, Beta glares at Epsilon.

"I mean, is it even *proper* for our lord to fall for someone as *lowly* as *me*…?" Epsilon sniggers as she puts emphasis on that last bit. "After all, think about it. Your figure is so much nicer than mine, Beta, and you're so much prettier!"

"Wh—?!"

Epsilon is lording over Beta.

Her triumphant face makes it abundantly clear she doesn't consider herself lowly in the slightest.

It's the hollow modesty of the victor.

Her words are the proclamation of a woman whose figure is better, whose looks are stronger, and who's earned the affection of their lord. Each and every one of her compliments is backhanded.

Epsilon speaks from a place of superiority. Spurred by her pride, she always does.

“Your boobs are so *big*…”

“Urk—”

“And your waist is so *small*…”

“Urrrk—”

“And your legs are so *long*…”

“Urrrrrk—”

“Why, you’re so *pretty*!”

“Urrrrrrrk—”

To deliver the clincher to her wounded foe, Epsilon unveils Hidden Technique: Master Shadow Come-Hither Pose and flaunts its overwhelming power directly before Beta’s eyes.

Tears immediately begin welling up.

“Surely *you* must have felt his hot gaze on you before, right?”

“I—I—I—I—I—I—I—I—I…”

“Don’t tell me you *haven’t*.”

“I—I—I—I—I—I—I—I—I…”

“That can’t *possibly* be true…”

“I—I—I—I—I—I—I…I, I… *Boo-hoo!*” Beta weeps as she runs off.

“Heh-heh-heh… All the natural ones should just be culled from the world… Now I’ll be on the receiving end of his affection… Only me…” Epsilon smiles as she watches Beta flee.

Some say her beloved master once muttered in an empty room, “Epsilon’s head is as swollen as her slime pads.”

Just as he said, her pride swells beyond the heavens. If her ego wasn’t so big, she would be incredibly docile and caring.

If she wasn’t so proud, that is…

The Eminence in Shadow

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as I can remember.
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Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

This Situation Calls for a
"Who *Is* That Guy?!"

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

This Situation Calls for a “Who *Is* That Guy?!”

Rose can hear rain falling.

The sound of the droplets striking outside pulls her attention away.

She steadies her breathing, then lowers her practice rapier.

After using her hand to wipe away the sweat trickling down her face, she fixes her hair.

Only the rain breaks the silence in the dim training facility.

For a little while, Rose merely closes her eyes and focuses on its noise. The damp air causes a lump to form in her throat, but she swallows it down.

She’s always found the sound of water to be beautiful.

Rose was born in the Oriana Kingdom, a land of art and culture. She’d been exposed to countless art forms in her childhood, and her aesthetic sensibilities were superb. Over the course of their lives, every member of Oriana royalty chose a single art form in which to excel. It could be painting, or music, or acting. Each was free to choose as they pleased.

Although the young Rose expressed great interest in the arts, she was never able to settle on one. In her eyes, all forms of art were beautiful and unique.

Painting, music, acting, fashion design, sculpture, and the rest were all so wonderful—it was impossible for her to pick just one. Consequently, she dabbled in them all and received high praise for her work in each.

Every artist in the Oriana Kingdom waited with bated breath to see which artistic path Rose would choose to continue down.

But she chose the art of the blade.

One day, out of the blue, she cast aside all the mediums and began training with the sword.

“Why the sword?” they all asked her.

She said little on the subject.

Only that she had seen beauty in swordsmanship.

However, the people of the Oriana Kingdom looked down on it as the purview of brutes and savages. Few were willing to acknowledge it as a legitimate art form.

Ignoring her family’s objections, Rose enrolled in the Midgar Academy for Dark Knights.

A certain beautiful sword work is etched deep in her heart.

She’s never told anyone about it, but it’s a memory she holds dear. The sole reason she’s embarked on this path is out of quiet admiration for a single swordsman.

She knows she’ll never forget the beauty of the swordplay she saw that day.

Her life’s work is to someday emulate that beauty.

Nobody back in her own country will acknowledge it, but she doesn’t care. She isn’t pursuing this out of a desire for praise.

She’s determined to walk this path, even if no one else deems it worthy.

She’s been fine with that.

A few days ago, though, she received a letter.

“Father will be attending the Bushin Festival…,” she mutters, her lips the color of cherry blossoms. It’s a rarity for the king, a man who holds swordplay in contempt, to come watch the event. Rose is certain he’s coming to drag her back home.

There is a lot of speculation, but one rumor in particular that catches Rose’s attention.

Word is that a man has been unofficially chosen as her fiancé.

As soon as she heard that, she immediately sent a letter off to her family asking if this was true. However, she hasn’t gotten a response yet.

But she’s already decided on another man. That man, who doesn’t fear death and whose soul is fiery and pure, is the one she’s chosen as her life partner.

That’s why she needs to force her father to see her abilities at the Bushin Festival…with her sword.

Then, she prays, he just might… Rose slaps her cheeks.

“Focus,” she mutters, flinging off her sweat-soaked tunic.

Her skin, glistening with sweat, is laid bare. The only thing hiding her sizable breasts is her sports bra from Mitsugoshi.

It’s a little immodest of her, but she knows nobody else is going to come, so she chooses not to worry about it.

She readies her practice rapier, then summons an image to her mind.

She envisions her finest performance…back when the academy was under attack.

The Bushin Festival is going to start soon. She has to re-create that feeling before it does.

Rose’s rapier flashes through the air, and beads of sweat go flying. Her elegant honey hair comes unraveled.

She brushes aside the strands that have fallen in her face, then continues swinging.

The whole time, she can hear the rain falling outside.

The feeling refuses to return.

The Bushin Festival season is upon us.

I walk down the bustling roads of the capital. The makeup of the crowd is different than usual.

The people passing me on the street all have different races, nationalities, and jobs, but they share the common goal of wanting to enjoy the event. They've never talked to one another before and probably never will again, but they nonetheless share a strange sense of unity.

That's just how festivals work.

I don't hate this kind of vibe. After all, it's necessary for one thing: When everyone is collectively focused on something, it makes for the greatest stage imaginable.

The Bushin Festival.

"There's a big wave coming through, and I'll be damned if I don't ride it."

I'm gonna check off the top item on my bucket list.

It's that trope where a mysterious badass joins a big tournament, and everyone goes from *Hold up, that guy's gonna get himself killed!* to *Wait, he's superstrong!* to *Just who* is *that guy?!*

To do that, I'm gonna need everyone's cooperation.

After pushing my way through the crowd, I eventually end up at the royal capital branch of Mitsugoshi.

Ignoring the line of people patiently waiting their turn, I stroll right in. I'm friends with the owner, so it's fine, right?

The store is hectic since it's the busy season and all, but it isn't long before an attractive saleswoman spots me and drags me off.

"I know it totally sounds like I'm lying, but I'm friends with the owner. I swear."

"I'm aware."

I was a little concerned whether she really knew me or not, but it turns out to be the former.

She takes me to that room from last time with the awesome chair. I take my seat atop it.

Damn! Sitting on this thing really makes you feel like a king.

They even bring me a glass of iced apple juice. Not from concentrate.

Good catch on their part, knowing I prefer apple juice to orange. It's nice and crisp, so it really hits the spot on these hot summer days.

The summer wind comes through the room. *Ting, ting*, something rings.

"Wind chimes, eh…?"

I look at the window and see them hanging against a backdrop of blue skies and big summer clouds.

"Please wait here a moment."

I nod. The shop lady goes to find Gamma, and another one comes in to fan me. Her summer dress leaves a lot of her skin exposed.

"Y'know, I'm feeling kinda peckish."

"I'll have something prepared immediately."

As I gaze at the clouds, I decide I'll definitely come mooch off this place whenever I'm short on food.

Hearing that her beloved master has arrived, Gamma immediately leaves the rest of her work to her subordinates and hurries over to the Hall of Shadows.

She wears a thin, black knee-length dress, and she's paired it with a summery white set of high heels. After applying a fragrant perfume, she steps into the hall.

"I'm here, my lord."

Her master sits atop the Shadow throne, gazing at the sky with his arms crossed. Is that piercing gaze of his directed at the clouds or something deeper?

Gamma can't tell.

"I have a request." Her master turns his sight on her as he speaks.

When she meets his ever-dignified gaze, Gamma's heart flutters. It's a little inappropriate of her to hope in this way, but she wonders if he notices she changed her hairstyle.

"Ask, and I will make it happen."

"I want to disguise myself and enter the Bushin Festival," her master says.

The instant the words leave his mouth, Gamma's considerable intellect is already at work.

She thinks fervently, trying to suss out not only her master's intent but also his true goal, the one that lies beyond it.

However…she comes up blank.

Why is it necessary for him to take this action?

No matter how hard she tries, she can't unravel that mystery. She's forced to shamefully ask.

"Why?"

Her master averts his eyes from Gamma and looks back up at the sky.

And when his gaze leaves her, Gamma feels almost as though his interest has been stolen. Her eyes dart around.

"Would you mind…not asking me that question?" he requests, a distant look in his eyes.

Gamma casts her gaze down and bites her lip.

When she heard he'd fought Aurora the Calamity Witch, a thought had crossed Gamma's mind. If she'd been there, would she really have been able to figure out his plan?

She had no faith she would have succeeded.

None of the members of the Shadow Garden who were on-site had been able to fathom it. In the end, his choice turned out to be optimal, but no one

had been able to get on the same page as him. If Gamma had been there, she'd have had no choice but to determine her master's intentions.

Gamma is the brains of the Shadow Garden. That's her raison d'être.

If she can't do that, then she is worthless to the organization

And even though she knows that, she's messed up again.

"Forgive me… It must be something you can't tell anyone about."

Gamma hasn't been able to deduce so much as a shred of her master's motives or emotions.

She's an utter failure.

It would be far better if she just stopped trying to be clever and did as she was told.

"I won't ask any more, but it will be done."

Gamma kneels, hiding her face to conceal the tears of chagrin welling up in the corners of her eyes.

After wiping them away, she issues swift instructions to her subordinates. They go and fetch something.

"What is that?" her master asks as he eyes what they've brought.

"Slime—modified based on your Shadow Wisdom. By running magic through it, it takes on the exact same feeling as skin."

"Oh…?"

Gamma offers the flesh-colored slime to her master.

"So I just put it on my face?"

"Correct."

Her master stretches the slime over his face.

"It looks like I'm wearing clay," he observes as he looks in a mirror.

"This is where Nu comes in."

"Pardon me." Nu steps in front of their master and pulls out a small chisel-like knife. "I'll carve the slime."

"Ah, I see."

"What kind of face would you like?"

"Good question… One that looks kinda weak."

"Weak, huh…?" Nu thinks for a minute.

"What about this man?" Gamma opens a folder and shows Nu a young man's census data.

"Mundane Mann. A member of the aristocracy in the Altena Empire. Twenty-two years old. He's lazy, weak by dark knight standards, and was disowned five years ago. Afterward, he worked in a variety of places as a mercenary and guard. His final job was protecting a carriage full of the possessed."

The man had been lazy, but that was hardly a sin. He'd been guarding the carriage, unaware of what lay within. That was when his luck ran out.

"His bone structure is similar, so it should work out. We also already have his identification papers."

"Good. That'll be safer than forging them. Is this acceptable, my lord?"

"Yeah, let's go with this Mundane guy."

“Then without further ado.” Nu takes her knife and begins shaving away at the slime.

She’s excellent with makeup. In fact, when it comes to cosmetics, she’s their go-to girl.

She finishes carving in no time, and a plain man’s face is etched atop their master’s.

He lets out an impressed grunt as he looks in the mirror. “Ooh, this is nice…”

“Will this do?”

“Yeah, this is great. I look so weak.”

The face lacks any notable traits but gives off a plain impression. It sports sickly bags under its eyes, a pathetic five-o’clock shadow, a sagging mouth, and dull skin. The man looks thoroughly unreliable.

It warms Gamma’s heart seeing her master so pleased.

“The face will harden once you run magic through it, so afterward, you can take it off and put it on as you please.”

“Sweet.”

“As far as its weaknesses, it’s less elastic than the slime bodysuits, and it offers almost no physical protection.”

“Got it, so it’s for cosmetic use only. It wouldn’t make sense to make a full bodysuit out of this stuff.”

“Correct. Also…”

After Nu finishes her brief explanation, their master stands.

“I’d probably look the part more if I hunched my back.”

He tries walking around with his back twisted a little.

“Bravo,” commends Gamma, smiling as she claps.

It’s possible to tell how physically adept someone is just by assessing their posture and gait. Strength largely comes from the feet. People who are good at manipulating their bodies carry themselves in a way to transfer as much strength throughout themselves as possible. Of course, that isn’t the end-all be-all of gauging someone, but it’s a useful point of reference.

Gamma’s master once taught her that, and she understands it perfectly. However, that perfection doesn’t extend to her ability to put it into practice. Her posture is elegant but nothing more. She’s a textbook example of how this rule doesn’t apply to everyone.

“I should drop my shoulders, too… Yeah. And I want to be careful not to misalign my pelvis. It’d be a pain if it got stuck that way.”

Gamma is filled with pleasant feelings as she watches her master practice walking in a way to give the impression of weakness. She gives instructions to her subordinates.

“Prepare clothes and a cheap sword.”

“Ah, good thinking.”

Hearing those three words, Gamma’s heart is filled to the brim.

“Yeah, those look good. I’m gonna go register for the Bushin Festival.”

Her master must have been messing with his vocal cords, as his voice comes out low and husky.

“Here are his papers. Take care out there.”

Gamma lowers her head and watches her master recede.

“Thanks. Oh yeah, one other thing.”

Her master stops in front of the door.

“That hairstyle looks nice on you.”

Gamma’s brain freezes.

The door clicks shut.

“Plergh!”

And Gamma’s heel snaps.

“Gamma?!”

Her face plants straight into the floor, but despite the blood gushing from her nose, her expression is one of absolute bliss.

Registration for the Bushin Festival is handled at the arena’s reception desk.

I get in line, glancing at the other dark knights around me.

The guy in front of me, being tall and brawny, comes off strong at first glance, but his center of balance is garbage.

Hmm. It’s a close call, but I think I just barely look weaker than him.

More warriors line up behind me.

One guy has a solid center of mass, but he’s kinda tubby. Hell, that’s probably why his balance is so good. That’s what you get when you drink too much, man.

But I think I’m good. He’s got an intimidating expression, so I still look weaker.

I continue looking around and judging people. It’s like I’m holding my own little tournament of who looks weakest.

After all, I wanna go from *Hold up, that guy’s gonna get himself killed* to *Just who* is *that guy?!* so I have to start out looking like the puniest dude around.

That guy’s a nobody; that dude over there’s no big deal; the guy across from him is a runt; this chump’s *less* than nobody… Damn, there’s just too many shitters.

But I’ll be fine. Right now, I’m Mundane Mann.

After conducting my fair and impartial assessment, I determine I’m still probably the least impressive of the lot.

As I nod in satisfaction, someone calls out to me.

“Hey, kid. You’d best give up now.”

“Hmm?”

“If you don’t, you’ll die.”

I turn and find a female dark knight standing behind me.

My heart pounds. Could it be that classic cliché?

“Who are you?”

“I’m Annerose. If you’re planning on entering without thinking it through, you’d be better off leaving now.”

Annerose casts a stern glare at me.

When she does, I pump my fist internally.

I knew it… This is the scene that always happens when a weakling tries to enter a big tournament.

“You’re an amateur. I can tell just by looking at you.”

Annerose walks toward me, then stops an arm’s length away.

Her pale-blue eyes give off a stubborn vibe, and they match the color of her shoulder-length hair.

“Your sword is cheap, and your body is frail.”

Annerose lightly taps my weapon and chest with her index finger.

“The tournament is fought with dulled blades, but if you take it lightly, you’ll die.”

She glares at me again.

I return her gaze and think for a moment. What would be the best reaction…?

“You shouldn’t go judging people by their looks,” I end up saying, then turn away.

The premise is that I look weak, but I’m secretly strong. It wouldn’t make sense for me to get all timid here.

It serves me best if she thinks I’m too cocky for my own good.

“Hey, there’s no need to get snippy. I’m just trying to look out for you, and…”

“Save your concern.” I make my tone as confident as possible.

“You really need to…”

Suddenly, another man butts into our conversation. “Yo, kid. You should listen to what the lady’s telling ya.”

If I had to describe his appearance, I’d say he looks like a rude pro wrestler. On the other hand, the ease with which he wears the large greatsword on his back and the battles’ worth of scars etched across his face make him seem more like a grizzled warrior.

Honestly, he’s probably the strongest person nearby besides me and Annerose.

“The name’s Quinton. I’ve entered a couple of these Bushin Festivals, but every year, there’re some weak-ass punks who ruin the mood. I’m begging ya here: Just run on home and suck on your momma’s titties.”

When the people around us hear the bald-faced scorn that Quinton is laying on me, the crowd whoops with crude laughter and hollers of approval.

My only response is to cast a sidelong glance at Quinton and let the corner of my mouth curl into a grin. “I’m stronger than you at least.”

Quinton’s face goes red.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Hey, Quinton! The kid’s making fun of you!”

“Quinton, you gonna let that brat talk to you like that?!”

Goaded by the hecklers, Quinton frowns and hoists me up by the collar.

“Yo, watch who you’re mouthing off to. What was that about being stronger than me?”

I offer no answer.

I merely grin.

“Looks like someone…needs to teach you a *lesson*!!”

As the words leave his mouth, Quinton hurls me back.

I crash into someone, collapsing onto the ground.

“Yeah, get him!!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Go easy on the kid!!”

By now, a ring has gathered around us. That’s ne’er-do-wells for you: never ones to miss a fight.

“If you’re gonna apologize, now’s the time to do it,” threatens Quinton as he cracks his neck.

I shake my head. “Man, you really are third-rate.”

“Your ass is grass!” Quinton brandishes his fist and charges at me.

His form is complete garbage.

To put it bluntly, the people of this world suck when it comes to hand-to-hand combat. Or rather, they’re stronger when they use weapons. Unless one side either feels utterly assured of victory or finds their backs against a wall leaving no other alternatives, fistfights just don’t happen that often.

If someone held a tournament where no one could use weapons, I would end up winning. I’m pretty confident of that fact.

Countless strategies for what to do next pass through my mind.

Countering him with a right straight punch or a left hook would be simple but effective. Stopping him with a jab or a front kick, then hanging back, would be safe. Going on the defensive right away would be even safer. There are other options, too—using my knees or elbows is a strong choice, and tackling before hitting him while he is down could also be good.

If he were a powerful foe I was planning on fighting seriously, I’d probably go in with a jab. However, I wouldn’t clench my fist; instead, I’d hold my hand flat, extend my reach, and go straight for his eyes.

Against this guy, though, there’s no need to go that far. Plus…I don’t feel like fighting yet.

“Take that!!”

Quinton’s fist sinks into my cheek.

It sends me flying, crashing into the wall of spectators.

“I ain’t done with you yet!!”

Quinton’s fists bear down on me.

Left, right, left, right, right, right.

I don’t lay a finger on him, taking the blows and collapsing when I feel that the timing is just right.

“Hey, that guy’s weak! He’s weak as shit!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! He got his ass beat!”

I bask happily in the jeers of the peanut gallery.

“What? Cat got your tongue? Spineless punk.” Quinton looks down at me and grins.

I look up at him and return the smile. “My fists are too valuable to waste on you.”

“Looks like someone hasn’t learned his manners yet!”

“That’s quite enough!!” Annerose stops Quinton’s brandished fist with her comment. “You’re taking this too far. If you want to keep having a go, you’ll have to do it with me.”

She looks up at him and glares.

“Hey, yo, that chick just said she’d ‘have a go’ with you!!”

“‘Have a go’ with me, too, lady!!”

Contrary to everyone around him, though, Quinton’s expression is grave. He clicks his tongue and turns around.

“What’s wrong, Quinton? Gotta take a piss or something?”

“What? It’s over already? Boo!”

Quinton leaves, and the crowd dissipates.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t think it would get that bad.”

Annerose offers me her hand.

I ignore it and stand up on my own.

“If you were gonna stop him, you could have done it from the start. Am I wrong?”

When she hears my question, Annerose flinches. “I figured it would be better for you to take some licks here than suffer something irreparable at the Bushin Festival proper, but he took it too far. How badly are you injured?”

Annerose reaches out to touch me, but I hold up a hand and stop her.

“I’m fine.”

“No, you… What?”

It looks like she noticed. Despite the fact that I got beaten up six ways to Sunday, I haven’t sustained any notable damage.

My only wound is a small cut on my mouth.

I use my thumb to wipe away the blood, then turn my back on her.

“Been a while…since the last time I tasted my own blood…,” I murmur loud enough for Annerose to hear.

“…! Wait! What’s your name?!”

I can feel Annerose’s gaze burning into my back.

“…Mundane.”

With that, I vanish into the crowd…

…and pump my fist.

Hell yeah!

Nailed it.

“Everyone looks down on him, but a select few notice there’s something strange about him…!”

I love that trope.

If you ask me, people who show off their true strength *before* a tournament are third-rate.

After all, how are you supposed to enjoy yourself? What’s the point if you’re just gonna reveal your true power in the most boring way and place imaginable?

It’s better if everyone thinks you’re a chump until the actual battles start. Then, once you actually get into the rounds, you can make them think, *Wait, he’s kind of strong!* And then, at the climax, that transitions into *No… He’s got a lot of power!* Now that’s some first-rate stuff.

Controlling the audience’s expectations right up until that decisive moment is my mission during this Bushin Festival.

For a little while, I lurk behind cover while reflecting on what I just pulled off.

Then, once I see that Annerose and the others are gone, I sneak back into line and finish registering.

The Bushin Festival prelims start next week. I go back to looking like Cid, spend some time gazing down from the top of the arena and envisioning various outcomes for the tournament, then buy two sandwiches from Tuna King and eat them on my way back to the dorm.

As I walk a path lit by the setting sun, I suddenly remember I promised to treat Alpha to Tuna King at some point.

Alpha seems like she’s always busy, so we never actually got around to it. Oh well. I’m sure I’ll end up buying her that sandwich one of these days. She’s an elf, so she can easily live to three hundred, and I’m planning on using magic to break two hundred. As long as I get to it before we die, it’s fine. No need to rush.

The closer I get to campus, the louder the cicadas get. Summer evenings are their domain, after all. At least, that’s how I like to conceptualize it.

The academy glows in the evening light, and I can tell the restoration work from the fire is progressing smoothly. At this rate, it’ll finish up right on schedule just as summer break ends. Once, Skel got riled up and said, “I wish the whole damn thing had burned down,” and I couldn’t help but agree with him. Heck, the whole student body was hoping summer vacation would get extended, so I bet they felt the same way.

I pass alongside the schoolhouse and head down the path to the dorms.

There’s no one around.

Most of the students went back to their homes. Actually, now that I think about it, my sister got all pissed and told me to come home with her, too. I

ignored her and headed for the Sacred Land, of course, but I wonder what became of her after that. She'll probably be back around when the primary rounds of the festival start.

As those thoughts float through my mind, I shove the last bite of my first sandwich into my mouth.

Then, I'm shaken from my reverie.

"Carelessness is the greatest of all foes, you know."

I feel a practice rapier's sheath tap on my shoulder. I don't feel any murderous intent, so I don't bother responding.

The wielder of the sheath lets out a small chuckle and stows her sword. She's an attractive young woman with honey locks and gentle looks—Rose.

"Hey. Training?"

"Mm-hmm. I had some free time, so I came to get some swings in. I see you went to Tuna King?"

"Yeah, I'm friends with the owner of one of the stores near it. I only found that out recently, though."

"The three of us went there ourselves the other day. It was really quite tasty."

"The three of you?"

"Yes. Me, Miss Natsume, and Alexia."

I'm still not sure what the three of them have in common, but now that I think about it, I saw them together in the Sacred Land, too.

"Are you guys friends?"

"Miss Natsume and I get along wonderfully. And Alexia is a good person, so I'm sure she'll come around."

I doubt she'll ever be able to befriend Alexia as long as Rose still thinks of her as a decent person.

"Unfortunately, though, Alexia and Miss Natsume seem to be on poor terms," she remarks sadly.

It's not hard to imagine Beta and Alexia in the same group. I feel like they're cut from the same cloth. "I'm sure they'll get over it eventually."

"I certainly hope so… If I ever have to leave, I'm concerned about how they'd get along. We all have to work together. I don't know if we'll be able to accomplish anything, but I do hope we're able to change the world for the better."

"World peace *is* important, after all."

"Uh-huh." Rose smiles happily. "Oh, forgive me. It's getting late, and I really have to go."

Little by little, our surroundings have grown darker.

"Cool. Catch you later."

"Um…"

Even though she just claimed she had to go, Rose looks like she wants to say something.

"What's up?"

Rose hesitates for a moment. “I’m heading to see my father. He’s introducing me to my fiancé.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Well, congrats…or not, I guess.”

It’s written all over Rose’s face that this isn’t what she wants.

“I’m a princess of the Oriana Kingdom. As such, I’ve lived my life carrying the weight of various expectations, but out of selfishness, I betrayed them.”

“Uh-huh.”

“After this, I may go on to betray them even further.” Rose smiles sadly. “This time, though, it won’t be out of selfishness. I hope these fears of mine don’t come to pass, but…if something happens…will you believe in me?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“All I ask is that you believe in me, Cid, nothing more. I pray we’ll have another chance to talk like this.”

Rose hangs her head, concealing her face, and turns to try and leave.

“Hey.”

I call out to stop her, then hand her my other Tuna King sandwich.

“Here. You should try and relax a bit.”

“Thank you.”

Rose flashes me a gentle smile.

The next day, I’m woken up by Skel shouting.

“Rose, the student council president, stabbed her fiancé and ran off!!”

Still lying in bed, I tilt my head. I wonder what made her want to go and do that.

“What does that girl think she’s doing…?” Alexia clicks her tongue.

Natsume makes a practical remark from the couch in Alexia’s room. “It appears Princess Rose fled to the north side of the capital. She’s probably still in the city.”

Alexia casts an annoyed look at Natsume, then clicks her tongue again.

It’s thanks to Natsume that she’s heard the particulars of Rose’s attempt on her fiancé’s life. As inscrutable as Natsume is, her information network is useful. She’s even been able to dredge up a number of rumors regarding the Cult of Diablos.

“King Oriana likely wants to deal with this matter internally. He’s asked the Midgar Kingdom not to get involved.”

“That’s suspicious.”

“Very. Rose’s actions fall under the jurisdiction of Midgar’s laws, but prosecuting her would have a pronounced effect on the relationship between the two countries. Midgar will probably refrain from intervening.”

“True. My father will probably wait and see how things play out.”

Alexia’s father is a man who believes strongly in not rocking the boat, and as his face floats to the front of her mind, she clicks her tongue yet again.

“Rose’s fiancé is Perv Asshat, the second son of one of the Oriana Kingdom’s dukes. If she’s caught, I imagine her punishment won’t be light.”

“She’s royalty, so she won’t get the death penalty, but she’ll either be imprisoned or exiled… Anyway, we should find Rose before the Oriana Kingdom does so we can ask her what’s up.”

“Well, let’s think about this. Princess Rose didn’t discuss any of this with us. It’s possible she was trying to avoid getting us involved and making this an international incident.”

“So what?”

Natsume stares into Alexia’s eyes. “I think we should avoid doing anything reckless.”

“You’re saying we should abandon her?”

“I never said that. I just think we should consider our next move before we act.”

“What, so you’re trying to say I’m not thinking?”

“I never said that. I just think we should take a little more time weighing our options.”

“What, so you think I’m a dumbass?”

“I never said that. I just think we each have our strengths and weaknesses.”

“What? If you’ve got something to say, just come out and say it already!”

“Oh, I could never be so rude…,” says Natsume. Her eyes dart anxiously.

Alexia strides briskly toward her, then hoists Natsume up by the collar. The two mounds on Natsume’s exposed chest jiggle.

Alexia glares at her. “Don’t go playing all innocent with me.”

“Eek! P-please don’t kill me…!”

Natsume squirms to try and get free, making her chest wobble even more. Alexia notices there’s a mole on one of those blobs, and it pisses her off even more.

“See? You’re doing this all on purpose.”

“Eeeep…”

“I’ll beat your ass.”

“W-w-w-w…”

Natsume looks up with tears in her eyes, and Alexia clicks her tongue and lets her go.

The author collapses onto the sofa.

“Rose must have had some reason for what she did, and I *know* she was trying to keep us from getting wrapped up in it. That’s what pisses me off.”

“Wh-what?” Natsume asks.

“When someone tells me not to do something, it makes me want to do it even more, and when someone says they don’t want me getting involved in something, it makes me want to get in up to my neck.”

“Um…” Natsume looks up at Alexia, unsure how to respond.

“We’re allies. None of us really knows what lies in the others’ hearts, but we agreed we’d act as a team. Didn’t we?”

“R-right.”

“Since that’s the case, I’m not going to abandon a teammate. That means I’m not abandoning you, either. Got it?”

“…Yes.” Natsume stands with her head downcast. “Then I’m going to go collect information on Princess Rose. I’ve heard some unsavory rumors about her fiancé, so I’ll try digging there, too.”

“Look who’s cooperative. I’ll start by consulting with my sister.”

“Let’s meet back up tonight to exchange intel.”

“Wow, you get back on your feet quick.”

“Until then.”

“Oh, and stay safe out there.”

“You, too, Princess Alexia.”

Natsume bows, then takes her leave.

Alexia watches her go, then heaves a heavy sigh.

“Well, looks like I’ve got work to do…”

She smooths out her wrinkled clothes, then heads out after her.

The Eminence in Shadow

onestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
g as I can remember.
s it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
stermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
aracters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
hind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
airs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
anted to be one of them.
nk of children who worship their favorite superheroes.

I honestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
All I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
long as I can remember.
Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

A Battle to Attract
Only MVPs!

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

A Battle to Attract Only MVPs!

The week ends, and the preliminaries for the Bushin Festival begin.

I'm currently watching the fights from the arena stands with Skel. The sun is high in the sky, and attendance is sparse. Well, that's just how these rounds are. In fact, the turnout is usually worse.

Yesterday, I had my second round of prelims. They weren't held in the arena, though, but in a nearby meadow. You heard that right—the first and second prelim rounds take place in a grassy field outside the capital. There aren't any spectators, and the quality of competition is abysmal. I knock both of my opponents out with lariats, but it doesn't bring me a shred of joy.

The third round is when we finally get to fight in the actual arena. By this point, the quality of the fights is starting to barely approach respectability. There aren't many people watching, but honestly, it's a surprise that there are even as many as there are. The Bushin Festival's main attraction isn't the primary rounds, after all.

"By the way, what happened to Po?" I ask Skel. He seems to be jotting down notes of some sort.

"He had to plow the fields back at his parents' place."

"Ah."

Skel continues fervently scribbling as he watches the fights. I spot a necklace in the shape of a holy sword draped around his neck. It's the souvenir I bought him back in the Sacred Land. I'm glad he's actually wearing it, but it also makes me question his taste in fashion.

"What do you have going on there?"

"Collecting data on the battles. Noobs gamble on the fights with just their gut, but I'm different. I make my bets based on stats, probabilities, and hard data."

"Huh."

I glance at Skel's notepad.

The first few entries I spot read "*seems strong*," "*seems weak*," and "*hell if I know*."

"You know, the trick to gambling is ending in the black," says Skel boastfully. He keeps writing as he speaks.

"Who'da thunk?"

"See, when noobs gamble, they go ride or die on single fights. But not me. I don't get attached to any one outcome. *I* count my fights by the dozen—the more often I bet, the sooner the odds converge."

“Uh-huh.”

“After all, I’m a man who always ends in the black…”

I yawn. “That’s crazy, dude.”

“It sounds like you’re talking about something interesting.”

Suddenly, another man appears behind me.

“We are?” I ask.

“It certainly sounded that way.” The man, a showy blond hunk, grins.

“W-wait! I know you…!”

“You know this guy, Skel?”

“You’re Goldy Gilded the Unbeaten Legend, right?!”

Goldy responds to Skel’s glistening gaze by combing up his hair. “That nickname is a little embarrassing. Call me Goldy Gilded the Victorious Golden Dragon.”

“O-of course! Goldy the Victorious Golden Dragon!”

I think Unbeaten Legend sounds cooler myself.

“So I see you’re summing up data on the battles?”

“That’s right!”

“That’s some good thinking. I always make sure to do the same.”

“R-really?!”

“Of course. To make sure I always win.”

“That’s so badass! Do you have any cool stories you could tell me?”

“Oh, one or two, I suppose.”

I suspect it isn’t gonna stop at just two.

My fight’s coming up soon, so the timing is perfect.

“I gotta go take a dump.”

“Hurry back so you don’t miss anything.”

I go to the toilet and don my disguise before heading to the entrants’ waiting room.

Skel is listening to Goldy Gilded the Victorious Golden Dragon’s theory on victory with rapt attention.

“For instance, I’ll use this next fight as an example.”

“Got it!”

The next challengers are being called to the arena.

“Round three, match twelve! Gonzales versus Mundane Mann!”

The two dark knights square off against each other.

“My theory holds that it’s possible to figure out roughly how strong each side is before the fight even starts. Let’s start with Gonzales. We can figure out his physical prowess by analyzing how balanced his muscles are. Also, based on the glint in his eyes and his arrogant disposition, he gives off an aura of a tough, experienced fighter. His power level looks like it’s around 1,364.”

“P-power level?! What’s that?!”

“By analyzing the battle data, it’s possible to quantify someone’s combat capabilities—1,364 isn’t bad.”

“That’s awesome!”

“As for his opponent, Mundane Mann…hmm.”

Goldy Gilded the Victorious Golden Dragon casts a sharp stare Mundane’s way, then sinks into silence.

“Wh-what’s the matter?”

“No…it’s just that it’s absurd. But…it’s just so…”

“M-Mr. Goldy, sir?”

“Ah, forgive me. I lost myself a little there.”

“Wait… Is Mundane really that…?”

“Yeah…that man, Mundane Mann…is unbelievably incompetent!”

Goldy Gilded the Victorious Golden Dragon bursts into laughter.

“Huh…? Incompetent?”

“It boggles the mind that he’s made it as far as the third round! An act of god, maybe?”

“H-he does look weak, I guess…”

“His face looks weak, his body looks weak—even his aura looks weak! Mundane’s power level is thirty-three! Ha! That’s the lowest I’ve ever seen for a dark knight!”

“So Gonzales is going to win?”

“Yeah, it’s gonna be over in a heartbeat. Hell, the fight almost isn’t worth watching.”

And with that, the round begins.

Gonzales is the first to act.

With surprising agility given his brawny build, he closes the gap and bears down on Mundane.

His movements are far more refined than those showcased in the other third-round matches. It appears Goldy’s estimation of him as a tough, experienced fighter was on the mark.

Mundane doesn’t even react to Gonzales’s slash.

Everyone is certain Mundane’s defeat is imminent, but then…Gonzales collapses.

Right before he reaches Mundane, he trips and tumbles down.

His head hits the ground, and he’s out like a light.

The crowd goes silent. *Surely, he’s going to get up*, they all think.

But Gonzales doesn’t move a hair.

When Mundane sheathes his sword and turns around, the verdict is finally called.

“Th-the winner is Mundane Mann!”

“Th-this is bullshit!!”

“We want our money back, jackass!!”

Boos pour from the crowd around Gonzales’s unconscious body.

Unsure of how to react, Skel looks over at Goldy Gilded the Victorious Golden Dragon.

“W-well, these things happen, too,” says Goldy Gilded the Victorious Golden Dragon. His cheek is twitching. “Battle data can give us an idea of who will win, but when the chips are down, nothing is ever certain. This was educational, I hope?”

“D-did you know this would happen…?”

“Heh…” Goldy Gilded the Victorious Golden Dragon doesn’t offer him a definitive answer. “Let me tell you a secret.”

“Huh…?”

“There are two ways to win at betting. The first is figuring out who’s strong, then betting on them to win. The other is figuring out who’s weak, then betting on their opponents.”

Goldy Gilded the Victorious Golden Dragon stands and turns to leave.

“Tomorrow is the fourth round, and the sixth match is Goldy Gilded the Victorious Golden Dragon versus Mundane Mann.”

“Wait! That means…!”

Goldy Gilded the Victorious Golden Dragon whirls around and points at Skel.

“Can you…find the winning line?”

Then, he combs back his sparkling blond hair and makes his exit.

“He…he’s so cool…”

Amazed, Skel watches Goldy Gilded the Victorious Golden Dragon leave.

“I finished taking my dump.”

A young, dark-haired man returns to his seat.

“Hey, Cid! There’s a fight tomorrow with a guaranteed win. Let’s go all in!”

“What? No.”

“C’mon! Just take my word for it!”

“Screw that.”

“Tch, fine. Your loss, man!”

And with that, the two of them go back to watching the matches.

The fourth round of the Bushin Festival has begun.

Annerose is sitting in the front row of the stands, waiting for a certain match to start.

Her pale-blue hair sways in the breeze, and her identically colored eyes are fixed on the arena. There are more spectators than the previous day, but the arena isn’t even half-full.

“You came to watch that guy’s fight, too, lady?”

Annerose hears someone call out to her and turns around. “I remember you. You’re…”

“Quinton.”

Quinton still looks like a pro-wrestling villain and plants himself beside Annerose.

“You saw his third round yesterday, right, lady?”

“I did. I take it you did, too?”

“Not on purpose, but I happened to catch it. Whaddaya make of Mundane Mann’s round?” Quinton stretches his legs as he asks Annerose the question.

“It certainly didn’t look like he just lucked out and his opponent tripped.”

“Yeah. That guy did somethin’. I don’t have a rat’s ass of a clue what it was but thought you might. You’re Annerose, one of Velgalta’s Seven Blades, after all.”

For a moment, Quinton’s arrogant gaze meets the steely glint in Annerose’s eyes.

Annerose immediately looks away and crosses her legs. Her white skin is exposed beneath the slits in her skirt.

“I gave up that title. Now I’m just Annerose.”

“My bad. Oh, and I know I’m late, but congrats on passing the Goddess’s Trial.”

“Thank you.”

“So you couldn’t tell what Mundane did?”

“I—I couldn’t.” Annerose sounds a little sullen. “I didn’t think there was a chance I’d miss it, so I let my guard down. But…it looked like his right hand moved.”

“His right hand, huh?”

“I don’t know what he did with it. All I know is that whatever it was, he did it incredibly quickly.”

“Huh. I guess that makes my guess wrong.” Quinton exhales through his nose, annoyed.

“Your guess?

“I figured he’d used some kinda banned artifact or something.”

“Interesting… We can’t fully rule that out.”

“Either way, we’ll know after the match today.”

“I suppose we will. His opponent is Goldy Gilded the Unbeaten Legend.”

“Never heard of the guy, but I guess he’s supposed to be famous. Apparently, he’s never lost a match.”

A wry smile crosses Annerose’s face. “Famous, yes. For better or for worse.”

“He strong?”

“Interesting question… I’ve fought in a number of different countries before, both actual battles and tournaments in arenas like this. In my time competing in tournaments, I’ve been matched up against Goldy Gilded three times.”

“Ah. And if Goldy’s never lost…I guess that means he beat you.”

Annerose glares at Quinton. “Don’t be ridiculous. We never actually fought. Whenever he’s up against a strong foe, he simply drops out.”

“What? The hell’s up with that?”

“He’s a man who’ll never fight an opponent if he thinks there’s a chance he’ll lose. He only fights those he knows he can beat, then withdraws once he has to contend with anyone stronger. That’s why they call him the Unbeaten Legend—nobody has a chance to defeat him. I hear he doesn’t like the name, so he’s been calling himself the Victorious Golden Dragon.”

“Unbeaten and victorious, huh? They sound similar but mean totally different things.” Quinton laughs. “So you’re saying we shouldn’t expect much from our friend the Unbeaten.”

The corner of Annerose’s mouth curls upward. “I wouldn’t be so certain.”

“Whaddaya mean?”

“Even fighting those he’s sure he can beat, the Unbeaten Legend places highly in his tournaments. He’s even won a few of the smaller ones.”

“Ah…so it’s not like he’s weak.” Quinton’s gaze intensifies.

“Exactly. Figuring out the difference in strength between himself and his opponent is the man’s forte. And he chose not to run from Mundane. In other words…”

Quinton laughs violently. “Ah, it’s all coming together.”

“Not even the Unbeaten Legend could tell how strong Mundane is.”

“Either that or Mundane’s just a coward who uses artifacts to cheat.”

“And to add another twist, the Unbeaten Legend has only ever fought those he knows he can best. He’s never shown off the true extent of his strength.”

“Damn, things are starting to sound interesting.”

“That they are.”

Quinton smiles a beastly grin, and Annerose licks her lips.

Then, they both turn their attention to the arena.

Cheers and jeers flood the stadium, and Mundane Mann and Goldy Gilded stare each other down.

Of all the spectators in the stands, only two understand the true significance of this fight.

“Round four, match six! Goldy Gilded versus Mundane Mann! Ready? Begin!”

Goldy seizes the initiative.

The moment the match starts, he immediately closes the gap.

Then, he swings his excessively decorated greatsword straight at Mundane’s neck.

His target, Mundane, hasn't even drawn his weapon yet. He's just standing there, not even reacting.

Goldy, certain of his victory, flashes his pearly whites.

A loud crack rings out.

"Huh?"

Goldy lets out a small exclamation of surprise. But he's not the only one—nobody in the stands is ready to believe what they just saw.

Goldy's sword passed clean through Mundane's neck, connecting with air and air alone.

Goldy realizes his torso is wide open.

"Tch!"

His face twitches.

Offered that decisive window, Mundane finally moves.

And yet.

He merely draws his sword slowly from its sheath.

That's all.

His movements are sluggish, and he's completely overlooking this nugget of opportunity. It doesn't seem like he's even noticed.

Goldy puts some space between them, then glares at Mundane and spits out a few words. "You making fun of me?"

His annoyance is all too clear.

"Didja catch it?" Quinton asks Annerose over in the stands.

"Just barely." She continues staring at Mundane with the eyes of a hawk.

"I knew ya were the real deal. I couldn't see shit. I thought the Unbeaten Legend got Mundane's head good."

"Right. It wouldn't normally be possible to dodge the blow at that point. But…before the sword hit him, Mundane cracked his neck."

Annerose's voice is filled with unconcealed shock.

"He cracked his neck? I don't follow."

"All he did was crack his neck. You know, like this." Annerose tilts her neck to the side and cracks her joints.

"Nah, hold up. That doesn't make any sense."

"I know. But the moment he tilted his neck, it made that cracking sound, and Goldy's sword missed."

"You're yanking my chain here! He tilted his neck to crack it and just so happened to dodge the attack?"

"I think that's what happened."

"You're full of it! There's no way a coincidence like that's possible!!"

A serious look fills Annerose's eyes. "What if it wasn't a coincidence?"

"What?"

“He cracked his neck so fast, even I would have missed it if I hadn’t been specifically watching him. A normal person can’t do that.”

Common sense held that people couldn’t crack their necks so fast as to render the motion invisible to the eye.

“Gah! You’re right…”

“It’s possible that dodging the sword was just an *afterthought* to him. Mundane started with a desire to crack his neck while the attack happened to be coming his way, so in addition to cracking his neck, he also dodged it.”

“Bullshit! That right there, *that’s* impossible! Goldy’s swing was fast! You’re trying to say the kid dodged it as an afterthought?!”

“I’m only half-certain myself. Maybe it was all just a coincidence. But if it wasn’t…”

“…! There’s no way I’m gonna believe that!”

Goldy glares at Mundane.

“You piss me off. Right there, you just missed a golden opportunity. You had a real shot at beating me, a once-in-a-lifetime chance, and you let it slip away like it was nothing. Meanwhile, you’re just standing there cool as a cucumber.” Goldy grinds his teeth. “You should be mad. You should be grieving. You should be scratching and clawing to try and win. The fact that you aren’t is basically an act of blasphemy against me.”

Mundane just listens to Goldy in silence.

“Did you not even notice what you just missed? If that’s the case, then I guess I can’t blame you. That’s power level thirty-three for you.”

Goldy tries and fails to stifle a laugh.

“But hell if I’m gonna let myself lose face to a nobody like you. I’m gonna come at you with everything I’ve got. So don’t come complaining to me if you die. Capisce?”

Goldy readies his sword, then begins gathering magic in its blade.

The air vibrates as the magic accumulates.

A murmur runs through the crowd.

“Here’s a fact you can take with you to the grave: My power level’s four thousand three hundred.”

And in one fluid motion, Goldy closes the distance between them and strikes.

“Demonic Golden Dragon! Fatality Strike!!”

The wave of golden magic seems to take the form of a golden dragon, devouring Mundane whole.

Or at least, it’s supposed to.

Suddenly, an *achoo!* rings out, and the dragon vanishes.

“Blargh!!”

And as it does, Goldy gets sent spinning through the air.

The crowd stops murmuring.

Instead, they gape, dumbfounded, as Goldy crashes to the ground and stops moving.

“Th-the winner is Mundane Mann!!”

As Mundane turns to leave, they’re chanting his name in the stands.

“That Goldy Gilded guy wasn’t no pushover…”

That’s the first thing to leave Quinton’s mouth post-match.

After hearing Annerose’s description of the man, Quinton’s opinion of him had been low.

He hadn’t expected Goldy to be capable of materializing his magic to that extent.

That final attack of Goldy’s had enough power that it wouldn’t have been surprising if he’d advanced to the finals.

“He was definitely more powerful than I thought. If he’d been aiming for the top and actually took on stronger opponents, he could’ve made an outstanding dark knight.”

“So what’d Mundane do at the end there?”

Annerose crosses her arms, sighing. “If I’m not mistaken…he sneezed.”

“What?”

“The Golden Dragon must not have been too bright. When he sneezed, he brought his sword down, and Goldy ran right into it.”

“No, that doesn’t make any sense. You’re saying a sneeze beat a dragon?”

“It certainly seems that way. Goldy said Mundane missed a golden opportunity, but maybe Mundane didn’t see it as one. He could have taken Goldy down whenever he wanted. In other words, he didn’t need to seize every opening… Or maybe to Mundane, Goldy was never *not* defenseless…?”

Just considering this sends shivers down Annerose’s spine.

It’s impossible.

At the end of the day, it is only a theory… She assumes she must simply be wildly overthinking things.

“This is nonsense.” Quinton scoffs, then aggressively abandons his seat. “But hey, it was my bad for taking you seriously. I ain’t never gonna believe in that kid. Even if he keeps winning, he’s gonna run into me in the prelim finals. I’ll show everyone what a poser he really is.”

Quinton casts one last glare at the Mundane-free arena, then leaves.

Annerose, on the other hand, stays seated and recalls Mundane’s movements.

“Would I be able to pull off the same moves…?”

Still sitting, she cracks her neck and sneezes.

She tries it again and again, each time faster and with fewer wasted movements.

Crack, achoo, crack-achoo-crack!

“A-achoo…”

Then, conscious of the strange looks she's getting from the people around her, she goes bright red and flees.

The Unbeaten Legend has finally been broken.

News of his defeat spreads among the tournament fanatics like wildfire.

Even though it's still just the prelims, Goldy the Unbeaten Legend is a dark knight to whom people pay attention. They are astonished to hear he's lost to some nobody named Mundane, but their shock dwindles when they are told how the fight went down.

Oh, sounds like he just won by some fluke.

That is more or less how most of the fanatics see it.

However, a few of them—along with some of the people who have actually been watching the match—have doubts about how Mundane is being assessed.

Because of that, they decide to attend Mundane's matches and judge his strength firsthand.

"What's this?! Quinton is down!! And he's not getting back up!! Mundane wins another match with a single blow!!"

The B-Block finals for the preliminary rounds end with Mundane's victory.

Another one-hit win.

The fanatics can't figure out what to make of him. That day's victory qualifies him for the primary rounds, but nobody is quite sure how he's actually done it.

There's no way he could have won so many times off pure luck, so he has to have at least some skill.

In fact, his opponent in the prelim finals, Quinton, was a dark knight held in high estimation by the enthusiastic crowd. The fact that Quinton lost to Mundane without being able to put up a fight leaves the fanatics with little choice but to acknowledge Mundane's strength.

However, because they can't figure out *how* he won, they can't really pin down his true strength.

He's probably stronger than Quinton, but is he really fit to stand atop the main stage?

He might be strong, but can he really stack up against the historic winners of the Bushin Festival?

Arguments on the topic are heated.

In the end, most people decide he's probably on the weaker end among the combatants scheduled to appear in the primaries.

Considering his lack of history, that's to be expected.

Everyone else has earned his or her reputation in tournaments or on the battlefield, but Mundane has no notches in his belt to compare against theirs.

Objectively speaking, Mundane has nothing that proves his worth.

So, of course, expectations for him are low.

Still, a couple of the fanatics think he's a dark horse.

Given the list of contestants this time around, it's pretty much a guarantee that Iris is going to take the Bushin Festival this year, but if anyone can upset her…it's probably the miracle boy whose strength is yet unknown.

Such are the expectations being foisted upon Mundane as he leaves the arena.

The primaries start the following week.

Round one is Mundane Mann versus Annerose.

Ninety percent of people expect Annerose to take the match.

As I leave the stage, I think how the older guy I fought today seemed oddly feisty. His name was Qui…something or other. I could literally feel the hostility emanating from him. It was kinda invigorating.

Now I've qualified for the primary rounds that start next week.

The crowd's been pretty unimpressed with me so far, but next week is when I'm gonna show off my true strength, so I need to run through some scenarios in the interim.

As I walk down the long hallway to the players' entrance and think about my regimen for the coming week, a woman with pale-blue hair steps in front of me. I'm pretty sure she's named Annerose.

"Can I help you…?"

"I never imagined you'd make it to the primaries. Good work."

Her firm gaze bores into me.

"It was a foregone conclusion."

"Uh-huh. I see I misjudged your strength, but that's it. I have one warning for you."

"Yeah…?"

"I've seen through your movements. Don't expect to be able to beat me the same way." A confident smile crosses Annerose's face.

"Heh…"

The corner of my mouth curls upward, and I pass by her indifferently, as though to say *There's nothing more to discuss*.

I scream internally. *Please call after me!*

"What's so funny?" Annerose glares at me.

You're the best!

I look back over my shoulder and cast a glance at her. “I’ve got a warning for you, too…”

With that, I take off the wristband I’ve been wearing in the hopes that something like this would happen. I toss it at Annerose’s feet.

Thud.

The band makes a hefty noise as it crashes to the floor.

“Th-those are… No way. You mean you had all these weights on you when you were fighting…?!”

“These were the chains holding me back… But now, playtime is over…”

Thud. Thud. Thud.

I remove the weights from my other wrist and both ankles, then start walking off again.

“Wh—…? W-wait!”

This time, I don’t stop.

“Wait, I said!”

Annerose frantically rushes in front of me.

“Don’t think this means you’ve won. See, look…”

She cracks her neck.

And for whatever reason, she does it super-fast.

“I can do this, too, you know…”

“…I see.”

Not at all following, I pass by Annerose and her triumphant expression.

I wonder what she was trying to do just now.

The Eminence in Shadow

onestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
g as I can remember.
s it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
stermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
aracters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
hind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
airs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
anted to be one of them.
nk of children who worship their favorite superheroes.

I honestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
All I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
long as I can remember.
Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

A Mastermind Always Plays
Piano Under Moonlight!

Chapter 6

Chapter 6

A Mastermind Always Plays Piano Under Moonlight!

It’s a brisk summer morning.

As I gaze out my window at the clear blue sky, I stretch my arms wide.

Then, I flop down on my bed with plans to idle away my day.

There isn’t much summer vacation left.

Also, the Bushin Festival primaries start next week, so I gotta run through some scenarios at some point.

However, the fact remains that people can’t go on living if they don’t carve out time for lazing.

Okay, I might have just made that up.

It’s still true for me, though.

“Hey, Cid! I’ve got big news, so open up!”

Suddenly, Skel starts banging on my door and shouting.

As two people grow familiar with each other, they will inevitably end up annoying each other. Why is it that people seek out the company of others, knowing it brings such grief? These are the kinds of questions I’m forced to confront during one of the few summer vacation mornings I have left.

Honestly, I’m kinda digging it. It feels like I’m one of those masterminds who always keep others at arm’s length.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m coming.”

I unlock the door and greet Skel.

“Look, it’s a wanted poster for President Rose. Ten million *zeni* if she’s captured alive and half a million for useful information on her.”

“Huh.” I take the poster from Skel and glance at it.

“Let’s go catch her.”

“Wait, why?”

“’Cause I’m broke.” Skel’s expression is one of abject desperation.

“Didn’t you say you had some match that was guaranteed to go a certain way?”

“I don’t wanna talk about it.”

“Weren’t you gonna make bank off that?”

“Shut up. Look, I don’t wanna get into the details, but I’m broke. Which means I need money.”

“I see.”

“C’mon, man. You gotta help me.”

“I don’t wanna. Do it yourself.”

“Wait. Think about it. It’s way better for two people to search than just one. Our odds of finding her will *double*.”

“I mean…”

As Skel shakes me by the collar, I rapidly lose interest.

After all, I already decided I supported Rose embracing her rebellious spirit and stabbing her fiancé. Always nice to see some enthusiasm, that’s what I say.

In other words, I’m pretty much rooting for Rose to escape.

“I’m begging you here!”

Skel is bowing his head in a rare display of supplication.

Right as I start to say, “Yeah, but…,” the dorm supervisor’s head pops in. “Cid, your sister is here to see you.”

“My who?”

“Your sister. She’s waiting out front for you, so you’d best not keep her there long.”

After relaying the information, the supervisor leaves.

“Claire, huh…? I guess she’s back.”

I’ve got a bad feeling about this.

In the space of an instant, I weigh which of my two options sounds like a bigger pain.

“All right, let’s begin Operation: Capture Rose!”

“I knew I could count on you, Cid! This is why you’re such a great friend!”

I grab Skel by the scruff of the neck and open the window.

“Wait, Cid! What are you doing?”

“There’s no time. We gotta take the window.”

“Huh? Wait, what are you talking about?! Wait! No! Hey!!”

“Onward!”

And with that, I leap.

“Iris says she’s grateful for your information and she looks forward to working with you again.”

“It’s an honor,” says Beta as she watches Alexia walk in front of her.

Alexia carries a magic lamp, and the two of them descend a dark set of spiral stairs.

They’ve already come a decent way down. The air is damp and nippy, reminding them that they’re underground.

“It’s probably safe to assume that Perv Asshat is connected to the Cult,” says Alexia.

“Agreed,” replies Beta.

“The problem is we don’t have any proof.”

“That it is. And this is a matter of national and religious significance, so normal evidence won’t be enough.”

“Don’t I know it. My father made it abundantly clear—if we want to link the Cult of Diablos to the Holy Teachings, we need something that’ll convince both the masses and our neighboring countries.”

“And if we’re pegged as heretics, we’re done for.”

“It’s not like every follower of the Holy Teachings is involved with the Cult. It’s probably just a few members of their top brass.”

“That’s what makes this such a mess.”

“Preach.”

Their footsteps echo through the stairwell.

“My father has a long-standing policy of not getting into fights with the Holy Teachings. I wonder what he plans to do about the Cult of Diablos.”

“He’s going to keep ignoring them, I suspect.”

“*Keep* ignoring them…?”

The sound of Alexia’s footsteps skips a beat.

“Just a baseless theory of mine. Please forget I said anything.”

“…Well, I can let it drop for now. My sister said something that caught my attention, by the way. She said that King Oriana seemed kind of hollow.”

“Hollow, huh…?”

“It was my first time meeting him, so I wouldn’t know the difference. He also smelled sort of sweet, though.”

A sweet aroma—Beta knows exactly what drug can cause that.

“It seems we might already be too late…”

“The Cult’s definitely making their move, and given the way my father is handling things, our country is bound to be next…”

The two go silent as they continue their descent.

“We’re here.” There’s a large pit with a ladder right in front of where Alexia’s stopped. “It’s one of the subterranean tunnels that run beneath the capital. You’ve heard of these, right?”

“I have, in fact. The tunnels were built beneath the entire capital so the royal family could escape in a pinch.”

“Exactly. Many of the maps, keys, and ciphers went missing, so now it’s basically just a labyrinth.”

“So why come here?”

“To get rid of you.” Alexia grabs the sword hanging from her waist and… laughs. “Just kidding. Nothing shakes you, does it?”

“Eep! Please don’t kill me…!”

“There’s a good chance Rose used these tunnels to make her escape.”

Beta feels a little upset at having her brilliant performance ignored.

“I’m going to go look for her.” Alexia grabs the ladder, prepared to immediately head down.

“Um, would you mind waiting a moment?”

“Why?”

“Have you told anyone where you’re going?”

“Of course not. They would have tried to stop me.”

“You say it’s like a labyrinth down there. Are you confident you’ll be able to find your way back out?”

“Oh, that’s easy. I’ll just come back the way I came.”

“Um, I’m not quite sure how to put this politely, but could you find it in yourself not to drag me into danger on ill-conceived whims?”

“Nope.”

The two of them glare at each other for a few beats.

“If you have complaints, you’re free to leave.”

With that, Alexia leaves Beta there and begins descending the ladder on her own.

Beta strongly considers taking her up on that offer, but she can’t let Alexia die just yet.

“Protecting her is part of your job, too, Beta,” she mutters quietly, then follows the princess down.

It’s early in the morning, and I’m walking around the capital.

Skel ran off somewhere, saying he was gonna gather information.

In this world, people get to work as soon as the sun rises.

The main drag is already up and at ’em.

I said I’d help him search for Rose, but I’m not planning on taking this very seriously. I still want her to make it out safely, but pretending to look for her seems like a decent way to idle the day away.

I do kinda want to find out what provoked her rebellious spirit enough to end up stabbing her fiancé, though. If possible, I’d like to ask her about it in person.

One way or another, I’ll be happy as long as I can kill some time.

Rage tends to dwindle as the hours and days wear on, and my sister *definitely* needs some time to cool off.

As those thoughts float through my mind, I hear the sound of a piano coming from somewhere.

“Mmm…”

To tell you the truth, I’m pretty decent at playing the piano.

Back in my previous world, I practiced it so I could become a better shadowbroker. Okay, sorry, that’s a lie. My parents forced me to learn as part of my educational regimen.

My motivation was pretty much nil, as I would have much rather been spending my time training to become a mastermind than practicing the piano. That desire, however, was no match for the almighty educational regimen.

Even so, while my piano lessons may have commenced under protest, I started hating it less and less as I kept it up.

After all, just knowing you're good at piano fills people's heads with all sorts of preconceived notions.

When he gets home, he'll be super-busy practicing, they all think.

I kept my social commitments to an absolute minimum so I could become a shadowbroker, so that false assumption came in real handy.

Also, I realized that piano fit the aesthetic.

A mastermind playing piano under the moonlight… Sounds nice, right?

You make them think you aren't just strong but cultured, too.

It's so good…

When I realized that, I started taking my practice seriously.

My top priority was still my training, but I just couldn't get the image out of my mind of me playing the piano to set the mood before a big battle.

Because of that, I ended up getting pretty decent at it, if I do say so myself.

"Not bad, not bad…," I murmur.

Whoever's playing right now is pretty decent themselves.

Beethoven's Piano Sonata no. 14, the "Moonlight Sonata," huh…?

I'm a big fan of this piece. In fact, it's my favorite—the composition gives off the best vibe for a budding mastermind.

Even though I'm pretty sure I could take them in a "Moonlight Sonata" contest, the current instrumentalist's rendition has a unique flair.

"This is pretty good… It's like I can see the moonbeams in my mind… Even though it's morning…"

As I do my whole shtick to get myself in the mood, I finally realize something.

Isn't it weird for someone in this world to be playing one of Beethoven's pieces?

A serious look crosses my face as I wade through the crowd and head in the direction of the music.

I'm gonna be honest.

I have a pretty good idea of what's going on.

I'm not an idiot, after all.

I can hear the tune coming from the café on the first floor of one of the capital's foremost hotels.

Security is so strict, the riffraff can't so much as get in the door, but they recognize me and wave me through.

I step inside just as the woman with hair the color of a clear lake is finishing her performance.

"Epsilon…"

She's wearing a sleeveless dress, but it covers just enough of her chest to hide the slime. As expected.

Her legs are clad in tights to avoid showing her skin, and the fact that her shoes have insoles to make her taller is well concealed.

Her work is perfect.

When I approach her, she seems to notice me.

Epsilon bows to the customers, then leads me into a side room.

She closes the door and smiles.

“Did you listen to my performance, my lord? How embarrassing…”

Her face reddens a little, and she looks at me with puppy-dog eyes. That isn’t enough to fool me.

“Epsilon, that was the ‘Moonlight Sonata,’ right?”

“Yes, it’s my favorite out of all the many pieces you taught me.”

“Really? It’s my favorite, too.”

It’s not like I meant to teach her, but it’s always kind of gratifying when you discover someone else likes the same things as you.

“Thanks to you, my lord, I’ve been able to develop a number of powerful connections as both a pianist and a composer.”

“Wait, a composer…?”

“Of course. ‘Moonlight Sonata,’ ‘Turkish March,’ ‘Minute Waltz’…”

Epsilon goes on to boast about how she put out a number of famous modern and historic pieces, gained popularity among the aristocratic class, won various awards, and was invited to migrate to some artistic-minded nation.

Sorry, Beethoven, Chopin…and all you other famous composers.

In this world, all the credit for your work went to Epsilon.

“…And my last concert was received wonderfully. The next job I’m heading for is in the Oriana Kingdom. As you’re well aware, there’s a lot to be done there…”

“Right, ’cause they value the arts.”

“That they do… And this time, in particular, there’s a very important *job* I have to take care of there.” Epsilon smiles bewitchingly.

“Well, go break a leg.”

“I’ll try my best to complete my job successfully and give a performance worthy of your sublime compositions, my lord.”

Epsilon gives me a graceful bow.

“Oh, right, apropos of nothing, but do you have any idea where Princess Rose is?”

“Princess Rose, you say. Beta was in charge of that incident, but as far as what I know goes…I did hear she’d fled underground, beneath the capital. You could try asking Beta for more specifics…”

“Oh, no worries. That’s plenty to go off of.” If I’m lucky enough to run into Rose, maybe I’ll get a chance to chat with her. “Thanks. Uh…”

As I look at Epsilon’s smile, I try to think of what to say to thank her.

I was super-happy when she said she liked the “Moonlight Sonata,” so she’ll probably feel the same way if I say something she wants to hear, too. “Your figure looks great, as always.”

“O-oh, no—no—no, i-it really doesn’t! I’m still working on it…!”

Unable to keep looking at Epsilon’s face, I turn my attention to the scenery outside the window.

This is how the world goes round, I think as I gaze at the endless blue summer sky.

Rose walks down the dark underground tunnel.

Blood is still trickling from the wound she sustained on her back during her escape. The cut isn't deep, but it definitely isn't shallow, either.

It should have been treated immediately, but Rose's pursuers haven't given her time to indulge in such luxuries.

Instead, she's focusing her magic on the wound to prevent it from getting any worse. As time presses on, though, the pain grows and her stamina dwindles.

Her breathing is shallow.

As she keeps an eye out for her assailants, her mind keeps racing.

What had been the right thing for her to do?

What would have brought about the best outcome?

The questions spiral around in her mind, but no answers seem forthcoming.

Stabbing Perv, her fiancé, had been a spur-of-the-moment decision. She hadn't done it impulsively, though. She'd used the limited time she had to figure out her best option, then acted on it…or at least, she'd tried to.

But she'd failed.

Perv had survived, and she had to flee.

However, it was only a failure in hindsight. She'd misjudged Perv's skill, but the choice to eliminate him hadn't been wrong in and of itself.

In fact, she'd had no choice. The moment she'd seen her father's—King Oriana's—lifeless eyes, she knew she had to get rid of Perv. In her estimation, all the rumors—Perv's connection to the Cult and the empty puppet that was left of her father—had changed to fact.

That was why she'd drawn her blade.

Had she been overly impulsive?

Had she acted in haste?

Could she really say she hadn't been spurred on by impatience and rage?

Rose had thought she was making the rational choice.

She hadn't wanted to rely on Alexia and Natsume. After all, the Oriana Kingdom had to resolve the matter internally. That had only been a hunch, but Rose had been confident in it.

And politically, at least, she'd been right.

Her gambit had ended in failure because of it, but it was still Rose's mistake and the Oriana Kingdom's problem. The Midgar Kingdom still hadn't gotten wrapped up in the mess. She'd subconsciously dodged the worst-case scenario.

It was just a matter of time, though, before that came to pass, too.

The words Perv yelled after her as she'd fled echo within her ears.

"Turn yourself in before the Bushin Festival ends! Or I'll make King Oriana kill one of the other guests of honor!"

If King Oriana really did kill another dignitary like Perv said…it would mean war. Rose isn't sure how serious he was about that, but it's possible the Cult only sees King Oriana as a minor pawn.

And if that's the case…

Rose grinds her teeth. Her face contorts in anguish.

Her father is no brilliant leader, and Oriana is no vast kingdom.

To her, though, they're the only father and motherland she has.

All she wanted was to protect them.

But that desire led to impatience.

Rose slams her fist against the tunnel wall.

At the end of the day, she let her emotions get the better of her and acted impulsively. She'd thought she could just kill Perv and fix everything, but that had been naive.

Perv was nothing more than a sacrificial pawn. She should have realized how deep the Cult's roots ran throughout Oriana and that killing him wouldn't accomplish anything.

There has to be some other option…some magical action she can take that would fix everything…

Rose slumps onto the damp ground.

Implausible scenarios dance through her mind, taunting her. If only she'd done something cleverer and everything had lined up neatly…

But now, it's all over. She isn't even sure why she's fleeing.

What good would escaping do her?

What would it change?

Shouldn't she turn herself in?

Yeah…that'd be for the best.

"I see… All I have to do is turn myself in."

She still doesn't know what the optimal course had been then. However, her best option now is simple.

By turning herself in, she can at least prevent a war.

Thinking that makes her feel a little better. At the same time, she's assailed with sorrow and grief, as though she's lost something precious to her.

Rose pulls the Tuna King wrapper from her pocket. She ate the sandwich long ago, but it still smells faintly of bread.

It reminds her of a certain boy with black hair. He's almost certainly heard what's happened by now. She wonders what he thinks of it.

Is he worried about her?

Does he still believe in her?

Is he perhaps…searching for her himself?

If she'd been able to kill Perv and bring the king back to his senses… If a future existed where everything had gone right… Would she have been able to marry him and live out her life by his side?

That is, no doubt, what she's been dreaming of.

"I'm sorry…" Rose chokes out the words.

A single tear rolls down her cheek.

Her actions had shattered that picturesque dream into pieces.

Rose delicately folds up the Tuna King wrapper and puts it in her skirt pocket. She thinks of it almost as her dream's last remaining fragment.

"Ow…!"

A sharp pain runs through her chest. When she parts her clothes to look at it, she finds a series of dark bruises.

It's a symptom of the possession. The bruises only appeared recently.

Rose hangs her head and lets out an empty laugh. Her dream was never destined to come to fruition.

Suddenly, a small noise reaches Rose's ears.

Is it her pursuers' footsteps?

No—it's too gentle, too lovely to be footsteps. When she strains her ear, she recognizes it as a piano.

"'Moonlight Sonata'…?"

She's well versed in music, so she's familiar with the piece. The composition received unusually high praise, even in Oriana, a kingdom of the arts, and now she can hear it coming from the end of the tunnel.

"It's beautiful…"

It's as though the "Moonlight Sonata" is all there is.

The performance is polished to a profound degree of perfection, almost as though the pianist's entire life was spent building up to this one piece.

Rose follows the music toward the source as if a ray of moonlight is beckoning her.

The tunnels are referred to as the capital's underground labyrinth, but they feel less like a labyrinth and more like ruins. The walls are made of sturdy stone and covered in carvings and ancient glyphs.

Each has a number of doors in it, but the majority of them don't open. Maybe they need keys, or perhaps some mechanism inside the ruins is stuck.

Rose can hear herself getting closer to the piano.

When she turns the corner, she discovers a massive, dilapidated door.

The noise is coming from beyond it.

When she slips through one of the door's large holes, she finally reaches the source of the music.

She's in a cathedral filled with fantastical light. On the wall, there's a set of stained-glass windows depicting the heroes and a dismembered demon.

Light rains down from beyond the stained glass.

It's all centered on a grand piano.

"Shadow…"

He’s the one playing “Moonlight Sonata” in the abandoned cathedral.

Rose closes her eyes and takes in the beautiful melody.

Shadow’s “Moonlight Sonata” is different from all the other renditions Rose has ever heard. The composition is the same, but thanks to the instrumentalist, the tone is different.

Shadow’s “Moonlight Sonata” is one of darkness.

The deep, permeating darkness of the night with a single ray of light shining through it.

Perhaps that ray is coming from the moon, or perhaps…

The piece reaches its conclusion before Rose can come up with an answer.

She takes in the music’s final reverberations, then claps.

Her solo applause echoes through the cathedral.

Shadow, of course, hears it. He rises from his seat and replies with an elegant bow.

“Shadow, that was…”

When Rose gets to that point in her sentence, though, she realizes that she doesn’t know what to say next. She just knows she has to say *something* or Shadow will leave.

“That was, without a doubt, the finest rendition of ‘Moonlight Sonata’ I’ve ever heard. Um…”

Rose finds herself wondering what she’s trying to get at.

This isn’t what she needs to ask him.

“What have you wrought…?” Shadow’s voice echoes like it’s coming from the abyss itself.

“What…?” Rose thinks for a moment, then understands. He’s asking why she did what she did. “I…” She casts her gaze down, then chokes out the words. “I just wanted to protect everyone… I wanted to reach a happier future… But I couldn’t make that happen…!”

“Is this where it ends…?”

“What…?”

“Is this where your fight ends…?”

“It’s not like…I *wanted* it to end here…”

Rose clenches her fists.

She wanted to make things better. She still does, even now. But there’s nothing left that she *can* do.

“If you have the will to fight…then I shall bestow it upon you,” says Shadow. Bluish-purple magic gathers atop his palm. “I shall grant you power…”

“Power…?”

The bluish-purple magic flares, casting its radiance over the entire cathedral. The air trembles from the magic’s density.

“Will I be able to change the future…with your powers?”

“That depends on you.”

Rose suddenly realizes she's drawn to the magic. If she was as strong as Shadow…she'd be able to change everything.

If she had power…then there were things she'd still be able to do. Things that, as a princess of the Oriana Kingdom, she *had* to do.

Light returns to her eyes.

"I want it… I want power…"

"Very well…"

And the bluish-purple magic bursts.

It makes a beeline for Rose, then plunges into her chest and body.

The power's warmth suppresses her raging magic and settles it. It was heavy and uncontrollable a moment ago, but now she can command it with ease.

"It's amazing…"

Her voice is full of sincerity.

So this is Shadow's magic…

This is the world he sees…

"Revolt… And prove to me…that you have the strength to fight alongside me."

She suddenly realizes she can't see where Shadow's gone.

His voice is the only thing left of him still in the cathedral.

"Remember… True strength comes not from power but from the way you live your life…"

And with that, Shadow's presence vanishes completely.

Rose finds herself alone in the cathedral.

She can hear her pursuers' footsteps. She can sense the subtle movements in the air.

Unprecedented amounts of magic are churning within her body.

She had been prepared to let them catch her, but with this power…she still has a hand to play.

Rose draws her rapier and stares at the broken door.

A group clad all in black bursts through it…and blood fills the air.

They die before they can even perceive Rose's blade.

Having drenched the cathedral in blood, Rose stows her rapier and closes her eyes.

This must be how Shadow has fought against the Cult. Unseen and unceasing.

Rose is reminded of Shadow's rendition of "Moonlight Sonata."

She feels as though she finally understands what the sole ray of light amid the darkness means.

Perhaps the light is Shadow himself.

He isn't the darkness but the light standing against it.

That's how Rose sees it, at least.

“If we keep rolling out this string, we’ll be able to find our way back just fine.” Alexia strides forward through the underground labyrinth.

“I can only hope you’re right about that,” replies Beta from behind her. She yawns.

“Wait, did you just *yawn*?”

“Why would I do that? I will say, though, it’s already been more than half a day. Would you consider turning back? It seems most unlikely that she’s even down here.”

“Maybe you’re right. I was pretty confident in my source, though…”

“Once we get back, we can try digging around for information again.”

Their footsteps echo through the lamplit tunnel.

It continues on monotonously.

Suddenly, Beta senses a powerful burst of magic and stops in her tracks.

Alexia stops a beat slower and whirls around.

“Just now…someone was using magic. And a lot of it…”

“It could have been Princess Rose.”

“Wait, did you notice it before I did?”

“Only by chance. And the only magic I can perform myself is defensive.”

“Well, if you say so. We should hurry.”

The two of them rush toward the magic.

After passing through a massive, broken door, they find themselves in an old cathedral.

“Rose…”

Rose is standing there with her eyes closed.

Strewn at her feet are a group of corpses all clad in black. Seeing that Rose is clearly different than normal, Alexia stops in her tracks.

“Alexia, is that you…?” Rose slowly opens her eyes.

“What is with your magic…?”

“I’ve obtained power…and now, I have to follow through on my beliefs.”

With that, Rose strides past Alexia.

“W-wait! What’s going on?! Why did you stab your fiancé?!”

Rose looks over her shoulder. “Alexia…I’m sorry. I don’t want to get you wrapped up in this.” She gazes at her as though something is too bright.

“Please tell me why! At the very least! If you don’t, I won’t know what’s going on!”

“If I tell you, you’ll be part of it.”

Alexia returns Rose’s look with a glare. “Back at the Sanctuary…we were all powerless. We were just *there*, spectating. We didn’t even know who was in the right and who was in the wrong. We only knew that if we stayed in the dark, we’d eventually lose everything we held dear… That’s why we got together and talked. We agreed we’d protect that stuff together, the three of us.”

As Rose listens to Alexia’s speech, she looks as though she’s gazing at something distant and hazy.

“I believed in what we said that day, so why are you looking at me like that? Do you think I’m just a spectator, too?”

“I’m sorry…”

“Answer me!”

Rose offers Alexia a sad smile. “It’s too late for me to go back. That’s why…I’m jealous of you.”

“I don’t follow. You’re jealous of an ignorant spectator?”

“That’s not what I mean. I’ve already lost so much, and I’m sure I’ll lose even more. People will disavow me, call me evil.”

“What are you planning on doing…?”

“I’m sorry… I have to go.”

Rose makes to leave, but Alexia clicks her tongue to halt her in her tracks. “Stop right there.”

With that, Alexia draws her sword. “Enough of this. I’ll just make you listen by force. I’m no spectator.”

Rose draws her rapier in kind.

The two of them stare at each other. Alexia’s red eyes are filled with rage, Rose’s honey eyes with a deep sadness.

The tip of Rose’s rapier twitches.

Then, they move in unison.

Their reactions are simultaneous, their speed is identical, and their overall skill is a perfect match.

For an instant, surprise colors Rose’s face. She’s supposed to be the strongest dark knight in the academy. There’s supposed to be a definitive gap between her skill and Alexia’s. That was true when she enrolled, at least.

In that tiny time frame, though, Alexia’s sword work has progressed so rapidly, it’s nigh unrecognizable. It bears a striking resemblance to the style of a certain man.

That’s right, Alexia’s technique…is Shadow’s.

The two blades collide.

Magic explodes, covering the cathedral.

The two of them are evenly matched, yet the result is clear.

Alexia’s sword goes flying into the air, and Rose strikes her in the chin with her rapier’s hilt.

Alexia crumples.

Rose simply has more magic.

If Alexia’s magic had been on the same level…who can say how the fight would have gone?

“I’m sorry.”

Rose apologizes to Alexia one last time, then stands to leave.

That’s when she notices Natsume.

Oddly, Natsume has been completely outside of Rose’s view.

“Miss Natsume… I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

“I won’t try to stop you. I don’t have the right.”

Natsume’s expression is impossible to read.

Rose remembers Natsume as having been a much softer person than this.

“But…I will say that this is a surprise. Even idiots have their worries, I see. We may have come from different countries, belonged to different organizations, possessed different dispositions, and held different beliefs. Nevertheless, we were all working toward the same goal. Maybe this alliance of ours wasn’t so bad after all…”

“Miss Natsume…?”

“Godspeed. Someday, our paths will cross again… Until then, I have a little more babysitting to do.”

With that, Natsume kneels and starts tending to Alexia.

“Miss Natsume, who are…?”

“You’d best be on your way. She’s only fainted, so she’ll be up any minute now.”

Natsume grins impishly.

There are so many things Rose wants to ask her.

It’s clear, though, that neither of them has any intention of saying more.

“Farewell…” Rose turns, then vanishes.

Natsume lays Alexia’s head on her lap and sighs.

“Is this what you’ve chosen, Master Shadow…?”

The stained-glass depiction of the three heroes and the demon’s tragic form seems as though it’s hinting at something.

The Eminence in Shadow

onestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
g as I can remember.
s it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
stermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
aracters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
hind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
airs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
anted to be one of them.
nk of children who worship their favorite superheroes.

I honestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
All I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
long as I can remember.
Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

Showing Off a
Smidgen of My Strength!

Chapter 7

Chapter 7

Showing Off a Smidgen of My Strength!

It’s difficult to sustain any emotion over a long period of time.

Even if you lose something precious to you, you won’t be as sad about it in ten years. Emotions fade by nature.

Positive ones are no different. It’s impossible to make a single moment of joy or happiness last for a decade, either. Even anger diminishes with time.

And thus, I have a theory I’d like to propose.

Most interpersonal problems will solve themselves given enough time, which means it’s fine to ignore them.

“Do you know what I was thinking as I waited for you outside your dorm?”

“Nope.”

I answer the intruder’s—Claire’s—question honestly in my room.

It seems one day wasn’t enough.

I guess my sister needed longer to cool off.

“I visualized beating you to a pulp. In my mind, I could see myself hitting you over and over and over and over. But my anger still doubled every second you kept me waiting.”

“I see.”

Discovering there’s a type of anger that grows with time has been a valuable learning experience for me. But people eventually die. Even though my sister is furious, she won’t be able to sustain those feelings to the grave. In other words, time is still the ultimate solution.

“But you probably don’t even care.”

“What? No. That’s not true.”

I gaze up at the ceiling of my dorm room as my sister sits atop my chest and strangles me.

Her red eyes and black hair flicker in and out of my vision.

“Wanna test to see how long someone can survive without air?”

“When you strangle someone, they pass out because you’re cutting off the blood flow through their carotid artery. Air doesn’t have anything to do with it.”

“Oh, I see. Well, whatever.”

Her grip tightens.

Actually, this is great. I can just go limp and take a nap.

“You’re thinking of going limp and taking a nap, aren’t you?”

“O-of course not.”

“It’s written all over your face.”

“I’m sure you’re just imagining things.”

“The next time you break a promise to me, I’ll make you pay. Understood?”

“I will do my best to become a man who upholds his promises. Now, would you mind getting off?”

Claire removes her hands from my neck, but she’s still sitting astride me.

“They say you’re supposed to sit on your dogs when you’re teaching them who’s boss.”

“Oh, I see. Don’t worry. I’m well aware of the pecking order here.”

“Nope. I don’t like your attitude.”

With that, Claire drops a piece of paper on my face.

“What is this…?”

I look at it and discover it’s a ticket.

“A reserved seat for the Bushin Festival. You can’t get your hands on them anywhere.”

“Huh.”

“I’m giving it to you so you can go watch the fights and learn something. I think there’s hope for you.”

“I dunno…”

“I see promise in you, and that’s why I’m going to help you practice. If you put in the work, you’re sure to see something come out of it. And I’m ordering you to put in the work.”

“No. I can’t.”

“You can. Are we clear? And you’re coming and watching the festival.”

“Okay, okay.”

“Excellent.” Claire stands up, still looking a little displeased.

“Oh, right. You aren’t participating this year, right?”

“Excuse me?” Claire glares at me with murder in her eyes. “I’m entering as Princess Rose’s replacement as the academy representative. Don’t tell me you didn’t know that your *own sister* was participating.”

“O-of course I knew. I—I was just double-check—Urk!”

Claire reaches out with her right hand and grabs my neck in a claw grip.

Then, she leans in and glares at me. You know, that thing delinquents do when they’re trying to intimidate someone.

“By the way, you remember my birthday, right?”

“O-of course.”

“I would hope so. And you’ve memorized all my tournament results?”

“O-of course.”

“And the day I won my first tournament?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Good. There are some things you should really make sure not to forget. Things you’ll want to remember…if you want to live a long and happy life.”

I bob my head up and down.

Claire gives my head a good rap, then releases me.

“I’m going to take the trophy this year, so you’d better make sure you’re there.”

“Yeah, absolutely.”

As she leaves my room, she continues glaring at me until she rounds the corner.

“Man, I’m tired.”

The primary rounds finally start tomorrow.

“Guess I should get some visualization exercises in.”

With that, I close my eyes.

It’s the start of a new week, and the Bushin Festival primaries are here.

Apparently, Claire went to the venue ahead of me. I hold the ticket I got from her and search for my seat.

The ticket in question is covered in extravagant gold leaf, so it definitely has that “reserved seat” feel to it. After following the directions on its back, I find myself in front of a room guarded by an ostentatious door. For some odd reason, it’s segregated from the general spectator area.

This can’t possibly be it, I think. After checking with the staff member standing by the door, though, I find that it can.

They lead me inside with utmost politeness, and the moment I enter the room, I immediately want to leave.

These aren’t just reserved seats. These are the hyper-VIP.

Everywhere I look, I see the faces of famous aristocrats and their families. The who’s who of the academy is all here, as are the daughter of the current leader of the dark knights, who was in section one of Royal Bushin with me, and the hot second son of a duke. Everyone here is notable in some way.

When I get to my seat, I find myself sitting next to royalty.

“Oh, and who might you be?”

It’s a woman with fiery red hair and eyes: Alexia’s older sister, Princess Iris Midgar.

“My name is Cid Kagenou. It would appear I’m sitting in the wrong seat. Please excuse me.”

I perform a beautiful spin and try to retreat.

“Oh, Claire’s younger brother. I guess that must mean you’re the one she gave the ticket to.”

“…You know my sister?”

My escape attempt ends in failure. If a member of the royal family starts talking to me, it's not like I can just ignore her. Alexia being the exception, of course.

"I do. We became close during my sister's kidnapping. I'm planning on having her join my Crimson Order after she graduates. Do have a seat."

"Oh, I couldn't…"

"You have the number correct. Please make yourself comfortable."

"…Thank you."

Princess Iris's sincere smile pains me. If only her smile had been as full of malice as Alexia's, I could have just flipped her off and bailed.

"Claire has told me so much about you. I'm a little jealous of the bond you two share."

"I think you might be overstating our relationship."

"Oh, that reminds me. You were friends with Alexia, weren't you?"

"Friends is…one way to put it. It's more like I pick up the gold coins she chucks on the ground."

"The coins she chucks on the ground?" Iris repeats.

"You know, like when you toss a stick and get your dog to fetch it."

"Oh, so the two of you played with a dog together? Thank you for taking such good care of her."

"We didn't play with a dog. I *was* the… You know what, never mind. Actually, those gold coins came from the royal coffers, so I should be the one thanking *you* for taking such good care of *me*."

Upon hearing that, Princess Iris beams happily.

"It sounds like you and my sister are like two peas in a pod."

"Yeah, no, that's definitely not how I'd put it."

"You know, Alexia was supposed to be here today, but she suddenly said she didn't want to come at the last minute…"

"Ha-ha. Is that so?"

"I'm really sorry about that."

"Oh, no, no, no. Please, don't worry about it. I mean it."

I make ample use of the free beverage service as we talk.

The daughter of the dark knights' leader joins our conversation. "Princess Iris, which contestant do you have your eyes on this year?"

The duke's hot second son pipes up. "I'm interested in your thoughts, too."

Apparently, the two of them know Iris through Royal Bushin.

"Well, they all look quite strong, but if I had to pick one"—Iris touches her cheek as she thinks—"it would be Annerose, the former member of Velgalta's Seven Blades. I recognize many of the other faces from past Bushin Festivals, but this is her first year competing. When I watched her preliminary matches, I could tell she was strong. I'm looking forward to facing her in the second round if we both make it that far…"

She smiles, full of confidence.

“I watched her fights, too, and man, is she strong. If we fought right now, I doubt I could beat her…”

“Yeah, me, too, but I’m sure Princess Iris can take her. The Royal Bushin method has been getting a bad rap ever since the terrorist attack. If Princess Iris wins here, though…”

“Hey, don’t go putting that pressure on her.”

“No, that’s not what I meant…”

As the two of them start arguing, Iris cuts in. “It’s fine. I was planning on winning from the outset, after all. I’m prepared to carry the weight of the Royal Bushin method, as well as this very country, on my back.”

I feel bad for interrupting when things are getting so intense, but I wanna be part of this conversation, too. “Um, is there anyone else who’s piqued your interest…?”

I probably come across as socially awkward right now.

“Wait, who are you again?”

“He looks familiar… Oh, right, you’re that guy who used to be in section one.”

“Ah, now I remember. You were Princess Alexia’s…”

Iris interjects. “He’s Cid Kagenou, Claire’s younger brother.”

The other two nod, seemingly satisfied with that.

“Unlike Claire, you’re the one without any talent, right? Make sure you keep up your training.”

“Your sword work was pretty uninspired, but there’s no point comparing yourself to others. Slow and steady wins the race, after all.”

“Thanks for those words of wisdom. So, Princess Iris, anyone else you found interesting?”

“Hmm…”

“L-like, uh, y’know, that Mundane guy that Annerose is fighting in the first round, for example. This, uh, this is his first time participating, too.”

I bring up Mundane in the smoothest manner imaginable so I can gauge their reactions.

Iris’s is noncommittal. “Mundane… I haven’t seen any of his matches yet, so I really can’t say.”

Great. That means that Princess Iris doesn’t know much about him yet.

“Oh, I saw him fight. He was fast but not much else. And his stance was amateurish, so it feels like most of his wins were just dumb luck. Annerose will beat him.”

“I saw him, too, but… He really doesn’t seem like the primary-round type. He’s got guts but no talent.”

The other two have written him off as a scrub, it seems.

Everything’s going pretty much according to plan. I’ve been able to control Mundane’s public perception just the way I wanted.

All the groundwork has been laid.

Now, the fun starts…

“There is one other person I’m interested in, though she’s not a contestant.”

I said my bit, so I’m already satisfied, but Iris pipes up again.

“Apparently, the winner of the first Bushin Festival, the elf swordmaster hailed as the War Goddess, is here in the capital.”

“An elf swordmaster… You don’t mean…?!”

“She hasn’t made a public appearance in over a decade!”

Uh…

“I would be surprised to find a single person fighting on that main stage today who doesn’t have what Beatrix the War Goddess is doing on their radar.”

Who?

Whoever this chick is, she certainly wasn’t on *my* radar.

It’s almost time for my fight, so I say I have to go to the bathroom and hurry on over to the players’ waiting room. Looks like Claire won her first round, and she has a chance of making it pretty far.

As I walk down the corridor, I pass alongside someone wearing a gray robe coming the other way.

Suddenly, I stop.

A moment later, they stop, too.

We turn around in unison.

Vibrant blue eyes peek out from beneath the robe and stare straight at me.

“You smell like elf.”

The voice is feminine and husky.

Her faded gray robe is worn and frayed.

I stay, waiting for her to continue.

“Do you have any elf friends?”

Her blue eyes peer into mine as though searching for something.

“A couple, yeah.” I don’t see any reason to lie, so I tell her the truth.

“There’s an elf I’m looking for.”

“Okay.”

“She’s cute.”

“Cool.”

“Do you have any idea where she is?”

“That’s not a lot to go off of.”

“She should look just like me.”

“Uh-huh.”

“She’s my late sister’s daughter.”

“Huh.”

“Do you know of any elves who look like me?”

“Um…”

“Do you know of any?”

“Your robe is covering your face…”

“Ah, right.”

She removes her robe, laying her face bare.

I offer no reaction.

It’s an intentional act on my part.

After all, she looks a lot like Alpha.

“Not ringing any bells. Sorry.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

I’ll have to ask Alpha about this next time I see her. They aren’t 100 percent identical, but they look similar enough that I wouldn’t be surprised if they were related.

“I see.” She shrugs dejectedly. Then, in one fluid motion, she draws her sword.

There’s no bloodlust or wasted motions behind her swing, only certain death.

As I watch her out of the corner of my vision, I accept what’s happening.

I get it. She’s gonna stop right before she hits me.

And sure enough, her blade stops right as it touches my neck.

All it does is touch it, though. She doesn’t cut so much as a single layer of my skin.

Her timing is exquisite.

“Whoa?!” Pretending to go weak in the knees, I collapse to the ground.

I think that was believable.

“Hmm?”

She tilts her head to the side and draws back her sword.

“I was mistaken. Sorry.” She gives me a neat bow. “I’d thought you were stronger. What’s your name?”

She offers me her hand as she speaks.

“C-Cid Kagenou…,” I reply, making my voice tremble as I take her hand and rise to my feet.

“I’m Beatrix.”

Beatrix doesn’t let go of my hand.

“Um…?”

“This is a good hand. I’m sure you’ll grow stronger.”

With that, she flashes me a pretty smile. It resembles Alpha’s.

“I’m sorry for startling you.”

After apologizing one last time, she turns her back on me and leaves.

I watch her recede, then mutter “…I bet she’s pretty strong” to myself before turning around to leave.

Iris sits in her reserved seat and waits for the match to start.

She can see the entire stadium from the reserved seating area, and it has a private staircase that leads directly to the arena.

The two dark knights are already being called to the ring.

One is the woman with pale-blue hair whom Iris has set her sights on, Annerose.

The other is a black-haired man named Mundane Mann. It's the first time she's laid eyes on him.

Iris's gaze sharpens when she sees the two of them.

A man sits down next to her. "It looks like it's about to start."

He's sitting in Cid's seat.

"I'm sorry, but that seat is…"

"Hmm?"

Iris looks up at his face and goes silent. She whispers a silent apology to Cid.

"Perv…"

"I trust you're keeping well, Princess Iris?" Perv grins gracefully, but the smile doesn't reach his eyes. "It's like a dream, watching a match with you."

"What a flirt. Don't you have a fiancée?"

"She seems to have flown the coop, unfortunately. Don't worry, though. Just a little lovers' spat." Perv lets out a light laugh.

His looks are handsome for a man around thirty, but something about his smile rubs Iris the wrong way.

"Is King Oriana in good health?"

Perv answers Iris's question without missing a beat. "I'm afraid he wasn't able to make it today. He told me he's confident he'll be able to come tomorrow, though."

"King Midgar plans to start showing up tomorrow, as well."

"What a coincidence."

Iris tries to scope out what lies behind Perv's unsmiling eyes, but she can't get a read on him.

"Is that the Annerose I've heard so much about?" asks Perv as he gazes down at the arena.

"The one and only."

"She's the talk of the town. I hear she left Velgalta and is currently in the middle of her journey of training, but I'd love to be able to invite her back to my country."

"I agree. I'd love to invite a swordswoman of her caliber to stay here in Midgar."

"Ha-ha. Midgar has plenty of talented dark knights already. Unlike Oriana…"

"That's what our alliance is for."

"It pains me that we're so reliant on you, though."

"Is that so…?"

Talking to him is exhausting. Iris sighs internally.

It feels like she's trying to have a conversation with a puppet.

"What about her opponent, Mundane?"

"This is my first time watching him fight. The rumors about him aren't flattering, though, and he doesn't look particularly strong."

"Then Annerose's victory is all but assured."

Iris's tone grows vague. "Not necessarily. Something about Mundane seems…uncanny."

"Uncanny?"

"There isn't any other way to put it. He certainly doesn't seem strong, but there's one trait of his that makes it impossible for me to see him as weak."

"…Oh? What might that be?"

"His absolute confidence. As far as I can tell…it's as though he feels certain he'll win."

"Hmm… Could it just be hubris?"

"I'm not sure. But there's no hesitation in his eyes. He sees…a path toward certain victory."

"He sees a path, eh? Can you see it, Princess Iris?"

"No. You?"

"Me? Oh, I'm useless with swords. Don't know my points from my hilts."

"Is that so?"

As Perv plays dumb, Iris snatches a glance at his well-trained sword arm.

He laughs bitterly.

"I can't hide anything from you, can I? Swordplay is looked down upon in the Oriana Kingdom, so I hope you'll forgive me this little lie. To be frank with you, I'm decent with a blade."

"Decent, huh?"

"Just decent, yes."

Once again, Perv's smile doesn't quite reach his eyes.

"Now then…why don't you show us how much this 'absolute confidence' of yours is worth?"

They look down at the arena.

"Annerose versus Mundane Mann!!"

The two names are called out…

"Ready? Begin!!"

And so it does.

As soon as the match starts, Annerose immediately charges into Mundane's reach.

She's well aware of his true skills, and she knows the secret to his strength is his overwhelming speed.

He destroys his opponents by moving so fast that not even a former member of Velgalta's Seven Blades can track him. That's the way he fights, and that's what makes him strong.

She also knows, however, that in contrast to his speed, his technical skills are lacking.

In all his victories so far, he's basically never crossed blades with his opponent.

Why is that?

One reason is they simply couldn't keep up with him.

But Mundane's stance is practically that of an amateur. She finds it hard to imagine he's ever had any proper training.

What if the reason is that Mundane himself has avoided doing so?

What if he's afraid his clumsy sword work will be exposed?

In other words, maybe he's won all his fights without crossing blades to hide his own lack of proficiency.

If that's the case, then all she has to do to win is avoid being dazzled by his speed. That's the theory under which Annerose is operating.

The only thing that worries her…is those weights he took off.

If removing his shackles lets him move so fast that she can't even react… she could end up losing.

As the fight begins, Annerose makes sure to crush that tiny fear of hers.

She's fighting an enemy who wins with speed, so all she has to do is restrain his movements.

If she can do that, victory is hers.

"HAAAAAAH!!"

Having closed the gap in a mere instant, Annerose lets out a battle cry and slashes at Mundane.

There's no way he sees this coming.

Even so, he blocks the blow.

He's fast, all right.

It shouldn't have been possible for him to block the attack in time, but Mundane manages to pull it off.

Because he's blocking her attack, though, his legs are pinned in place…

…and those are what Annerose has been aiming for.

"Uragh!!"

While Mundane's legs are still immobile, Annerose strikes at him again.

He blocks this attack, too, but Annerose's tempestuous flurry leaves him no room to take advantage of his speed.

Annerose wears down Mundane's guard a third time, then a fourth, then a fifth, and eventually his stance breaks.

She's won!

Certain of her victory, Annerose launches a thrust at her opponent's chest.

It pierces him…or does it?

"Huh…?"

His skin offers her blade no resistance.

In fact, his entire body vanishes lazily from her sight.

"…That was my afterimage."

She can hear his voice coming from behind her.

A shiver runs across her shoulders.

Calm down. She carefully turns around.

She's trembling but commands her body not to let it show.

"You're even faster than I thought…"

Her voice is steady. At least, she thinks it is.

As she trains her sight on Mundane, she thinks.

What should I do?

His speed far surpasses what she can react to.

What can she do to overcome it?

Think of something.

Anything…!

Anything at all……!!

"What…?!"

Before she knows what's happened, Mundane is gone again.

Annerose's body responds faster than her mind.

Her ability to react to the subtle shift in the air isn't birthed from skill or experience but dumb luck.

Kschhhhh!! She feels a terrifying impact and finds herself launched backward.

She can feel her consciousness start to fade and her sword toppling out of her hand, but she frantically reels them back in and stands up.

"Rgh…!"

A pained wheeze escapes her mouth.

She can see Mundane in her periphery. He's holding his sword listlessly and standing stock-still.

His stance is nonexistent, and he's making no effort to chase her down.

However, Annerose doesn't see that as arrogance.

He's just simply that strong.

"I'll admit it: You're good."

Annerose steadies her ragged breath and steels herself.

Mundane is simply fast. Overwhelmingly so.

Annerose doesn't find that fact unfair. After all, speed is just another form of strength.

Besides, she still has a shot at winning. Her odds are slim, but they aren't zero yet.

If speed is all her opponent has…she just needs to catch him.

She needs to land a counter.

The moment Mundane attacks her will be her final shot at victory.

The problem is whether she'll be able to react in time.

Luck was the only thing that let her block the previous strike.

She doubts she can pull that off again.

She can’t rely on chance to snatch this victory; she’ll need talent.

If her reflexes aren’t good enough, she’ll fall back on experience.

And if that won’t get her there, she’ll rely on intuition.

She’ll use any means she can get her hands on.

As long as she can land the timing…from there, all she’ll need to cut him down are the skills she’s spent her life building.

Silently, but with utmost concentration, Annerose waits for the crucial moment.

It comes.

There isn’t a shred of warning.

Mundane’s body vanishes, and the moment it does…a moment *before* it does, Annerose swings her sword.

Nobody is in its path yet.

But a second later, that changes.

She’s won!

Mundane appears, and Annerose is certain she’s got him.

Her blade is traveling on an intercept course with his body.

At that speed, dodging is impossible. She’s sure of that.

“What…?”

She gazes at his movement, dumbfounded.

He stops.

It’s as though he planned it ahead of time—right before he enters Annerose’s reach, he halts.

Her sword grazes the tip of his nose as it swings through the empty air.

This is no coincidence.

It is the product of perfect spacing.

It is the product of terrifying foresight.

Annerose thought she’d been timing her counter to match his attack, but that wasn’t what had happened. He had been timing his attack to match her counter.

“I see…”

It’s then that she realizes something.

After that fleeting exchange, she’s certain of it.

Mundane Mann…possesses superlative skill as well.

Her posture is broken, and his sword approaches her.

It’s the slowest move he’s performed that day.

But though slow…its technique is transcendent, almost to the point of art.

“Ah…”

It’s beautiful.

It’s also the last thing Annerose remembers seeing before she blacks out.

“He’s incredible…,” Perv hears Iris mumble from the seat beside him.

Down in the arena, Mundane has just taken down Annerose and starts to leave the stage.

Perv hides the unrest in his heart. “‘Absolute confidence’… It seems your intuition was right on the mark, Princess Iris.”

“I never imagined he’d be that good… I find it nigh impossible to believe a dark knight of his skill has gone unnoticed for this long.”

“I concur. Mundane Mann… I’d never even heard his name.”

“And I’ve never seen that technique, either. It was sharp yet beautiful beyond compare.”

“It doesn’t come from any established style, right?”

Perv has never seen a sword move so elegantly in his life. He doubts Iris has, either. Does this mean a practitioner of an underground style just made his first public appearance?

“Not that I know of, although there’s no way to know for sure without asking him directly. The surprises never end, it seems.”

Iris leans back in her seat, then lets out a sigh as though trying to relieve tension.

Nobody saw this result coming, so the reserved seating area is abuzz. Everyone’s attention has shifted from Annerose to Mundane, and the conversation is centered around his next opponent.

“Princess Iris, you’re up against Mundane in the second round, right?”

Iris smiles. “I am.”

“You sound confident.”

“I do plan on winning.”

“Oh…?”

“Mundane’s sword work was fast, sharp, and of unparalleled beauty. Sadly, mine doesn’t measure up to his in that regard. Looks, however, aren’t what decide matches. If his fight just now is the best he can do, then he’s still no match for me.”

“I agree.”

Perv nods, then adds a silent addendum. If that was Mundane’s full strength, Iris can still win. A little skill isn’t going to be enough to contain her magic.

But what if that *wasn’t* his true strength?

Iris continues, “In all likelihood, he’s hiding something. His posture, stance, and skills are all fake, yet he made it all this way.”

“Knowing all that, you still think you can win?”

“I may not know what his secret is, but I plan on taking him down, secret and all. I have a competitive side, you see.”

Iris beams as she stands. Her smile bleeds hostility.

“I see.”

“Now, I’m afraid you’ll have to excuse me. I have a match to get to.”

Perv watches Iris leave, then sighs.

He investigated everyone who might pose a threat to the plan beforehand, but Mundane's name never came up.

If Mundane is going to interfere, he needs to be disposed of quickly, but…there is no need to rush. He can leave that decision until after Mundane's match against Iris.

Mundane Mann. A master of a beautiful, perfected style.

Perv can't understand how he went unnoticed.

There must be some reason.

Some reason Mundane needed to hide his strength.

Some reason he'd never taken the spotlight.

He could belong to a school lost to history but passed down from father to son. Or no, he could be from the Lawless City and just have faked his papers.

The Lawless City doesn't belong to any country—it's a hive of evil and greed. The Cult has yet to worm its way into the inner circles of any of its three warring rulers.

If he comes from the Lawless City, that means Mundane must be a member of the Blood Queen's family. Given his strength, he has to at least be part of the leadership. Perv realizes he needs to run more background checks…

There's also a chance that Mundane is affiliated with the Shadow Garden. Mundane is a man, though, and the Shadow Garden should have no motive to do anything conspicuous at the Bushin Festival. All in all, it seems unlikely.

One way or another, though, Perv can sense something unfathomable about him.

He's probably a member of the underworld, just like Perv…

"What's his secret…?"

Perv's murmur is lost in the stadium's clamor.

"Mundane, wait!!"

Upon waking up, Annerose rushes down the corridor after him.

He turns around, and she stops in front of him.

"You trounced me back there. I was completely powerless." She looks up at him and smiles. "I left my homeland to become stronger, and I like to think I've done so. It seems I got a little conceited, too."

She holds out her hand.

Mundane looks down at it, then slowly extends his.

"I learned a lot today. Thank you," she says.

"This was the first time I've had to remove my shackles. You have nothing to be ashamed of."

"…That makes me proud to hear." Annerose smiles again and exchanges a handshake. "Mundane, who exactly are you? How did you become so strong?"

He smiles sadly, then averts his gaze. He seems to be looking far off into the distance.

"I threw away everything… I'm just a fool who pursued strength and strength alone…"

"Mundane…"

Seeing his lonesome expression, Annerose feels her chest tighten. He must have had a tragic past that left him no other choice.

“You know…if you want, would you be interested in joining the military in Velgalta? I’m sure I could find a post worthy of you.”

Mundane just shakes his head.

“…I can’t walk a path that bright.”

He turns away and begins walking.

“Wait! I’m leaving to continue my journey tomorrow! If you change your mind before then, come find me!”

Mundane doesn’t stop.

Annerose watches him go, then turns around.

In this world, greatness is relative, and there’s always someone stronger. To her, fighting Mundane and watching his sword work in action was an irreplaceable experience.

His swordplay was polished almost to the point of being an art. To Annerose, it looked as though he’d put everything into it.

She’s certain he’ll win. Before long, the world will know his name.

He’ll climb to the height of heights.

Right now, all she can do is watch him rise, but she’s determined to become stronger. Mundane has shown her the path she needs to take.

Once she becomes stronger, they will meet again.

Until that happens, she pledges to keep fighting.

Ahhhhh, that went well.

Prettttty darn well.

I was able to focus on making my performance as elegant as possible. There was a time in my training to become a mastermind when I pursued a fancy brand of swordplay. It was a little bit too graceful, so I don’t use it these days as Shadow, but I’m glad the work I put in back then is finally paying off.

Thanks to Annerose, I’m able to check off about 70 percent of my goals for this Bushin Festival. All that’s left is figuring out how I’m gonna drop out. There are a bunch of choices, though, so I’m at an impasse.

The simplest route would be to just win the whole thing, but looking at the tournament holistically, this next match against Iris is the best place to stage the climax. One option is defeating Iris and then just vanishing. That one has a badass feel to it.

It’s the scene where the mastermind defeats someone widely acknowledged as strong, then disappears, leaving them with a simple *My work here is done…*

I’m digging it.

Also, if I defeat Iris and vanish, my sister has a decent shot of winning the whole tournament.

But a scenario where I go evil is pretty appealing, too.

Halfway through my match with Iris, I can go, *I'm an assassin from the Assassins Guild…and now your life is mine!* and start ignoring the rules to go all out. That scenario gets bonus points for giving me an elegant reason to exit stage right.

Still, winning the whole thing really would give me the biggest sense of accomplishment.

There are plenty of other exciting options to pick from, too. I need to give this some good, hard thought.

As my various choices fill my mind, I make my way back to the deluxe suite. When I get there, I find some guy I don't know sitting in my seat, so I decide to bail.

Claire's match is over already, so whatever.

After heading back to the dorm, I start running through scenarios.

The Eminence in Shadow

onestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
g as I can remember.
s it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
stermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
aracters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
hind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
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affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

Lay Your Eyes on
My True Powers!

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

Lay Your Eyes on My True Powers!

It’s a new day.

I sit in my reserved seat and sip my free coffee. Apparently, nobody except Mitsugoshi has figured out how to make this stuff yet. Hats off to them.

“Mmm.”

I take mine with loads of milk and sugar, by the way.

I wasn’t huge on the reserved seating at first, but now that I’ve gotten used to it, it certainly has its perks. The friendly maids bring me pretty much anything I ask for free of charge, and it makes me feel kinda like a celebrity.

As I’m basking in the stadium’s energy, Princess Iris makes her appearance.

“Good morning.”

“Morning.”

“Is that coffee I see? It’s been trendy lately. I enjoy the smell, but the bitterness is a bit much for me…”

“You could always just make it into coffee milk with loads of sugar.”

“Coffee milk…?”

Iris calls over one of the maids and orders one. She really is a woman of action.

“Oh, this is nice…”

“Right? It’s like a magic trick you can use to make every cup of coffee taste the same.”

I follow her lead and order myself a fine banquet of toast and eggs.

If only this world had social media. The only way to make this meal better would be if I could upload a smug selfie with the caption *“Eating breakfast in the deluxe suite with royalty!”*

I finish eating right as various socialites begin trickling in.

As the name would suggest, their advent brings with it the beginning of the socializing. Being the lowly son of a baron, I am completely left out of the conversation. It’s fine, though—I’d just as soon stay out. So please, Princess Iris, stop trying to be nice enough to include me.

Things end up getting kind of awkward, but eventually, the second round of the primaries gets underway.

The socialites take their seats, but right as things start settling down, the door opens up.

I turn around and see a woman in a faded robe.

It conceals her face like it did before, but I can tell it's Beatrix.

She notices me and gives me a little wave, and I reply with a nod and a smile. We meet again.

However, the rest of the socialites' gazes are cold.

I can practically hear them all thinking. *Who is this woman wearing a filthy robe? Remove her at once!* The silence is stifling.

"Ma'am, I'm sorry, but you can't…" One of the maids calls out to her but gets interrupted.

"It's fine. She's with me. Please come on in," beckons Iris as she invites Beatrix in.

Beatrix comes and sits two seats down from me. Iris is between us. Apparently, that was going to be Alexia's seat, if she was here.

"Princess Iris, who is she?"

"Beatrix the War Goddess."

Iris's answer sends a stir through the socialites.

"Is she really…?"

"She said she's the War Goddess…"

"The legendary swordmaster…"

Hey, this is cool! I wanna hear someone say *That's the legendary Shadow…* at some point!

"It's been a while since you appeared in public."

"It has. I'm looking for someone." Beatrix nods as she answers the socialite's question. "My niece. She looks just like me."

Making sure not to repeat the mistake she made with me, she takes off her hood.

"Damn, you're fine…"

"Do any of you recognize my face? I heard this country had sightings of an elf bearing my visage."

"In this country, huh…? If I saw an elf as fair as you, Beatrix, I'd never forget it."

"Have any of you seen her?"

"Sorry…"

The socialites all shake their heads.

"I see…" Disappointed, she puts her hood back up.

Iris apologizes to her. "I'm so sorry. Everyone here is well connected, so I thought you might have some luck asking them."

"It's fine. I'm an elf, so I have time."

"By the way, did you watch any of the Bushin Festival?"

"Not much."

"Oh. Well, based on what you've seen, did any of the contestants catch your interest?"

"My interest… Hmm…" She glances around as she thinks. "Cid."

She points at me.

"Um, Beatrix…?"

“Cid caught my interest. Someday, he’ll be strong.”

I instantly deny it. “Oh, no, I definitely won’t.”

I can feel everyone staring at me.

“That boy’s going to become strong…?”

“It’s true he was in the same class as me, but his fundamentals were kinda…eh…”

“He *is* Claire’s little brother, but he doesn’t take to it the way she does…”

Finally, Iris cuts through the strained atmosphere, and that’s the end of that. “If that’s what you think, Beatrix, then I’m certain you’re right.”

Still, though, the socialites eye Beatrix skeptically.

I can see them glancing at one another, as though asking themselves, *Is she the real deal…?*

To them, she probably just looks like a dirty wanderer.

The way I see it, though, she carries herself naturally in the best sense of the word.

Her form, her personality, her bearing, and her strength as a whole are all so unembellished that nobody realizes her real power.

“Now, would you mind if I was forward enough to ask you to point out anything interesting you notice during the matches?”

“Okay.”

Thanks to Iris’s deference, though, it starts to feel like Beatrix is getting a bit of respect.

The air is still a little strained as the second round of the Bushin Festival primaries begins.

When Perv walks into the deluxe suite, a figure in a gray robe turns and stares at him.

The person’s face is hidden beneath a hood, but given the build, he can tell it’s probably a woman. After looking at Perv, she turns her gaze to King Oriana, who’s standing beside him.

Her assessment is brief.

“It stinks.”

“That’s pretty rude, lady.”

“Sorry.”

Perv suppresses his beating heart as he glares at the woman.

He’s using a highly addictive herb to make a puppet of King Oriana. He has no complaints about the drug’s effectiveness, but it has the downside of causing its users to exude a characteristic aroma.

However, he’s masking the smell with perfume. There’s no way anyone has found him out.

“Perv, this is Beatrix the War Goddess.”

“She’s…”

Beatrix the War Goddess. Perv heard she’d made her way to the capital, but here she is in the flesh.

She certainly doesn’t look talented enough to merit the title of War Goddess.

Her robe is faded, and her manners are nonexistent. After a single word of apology, she’s already back to watching the match.

But even though she doesn’t *look* strong…if she’s as talented as the rumors say, there’s a chance he just can’t perceive her strength. Given that Princess Iris acknowledges her as the real thing, he should assume she’s right.

He knows that the War Goddess’s face looks reminiscent of the great hero Olivier’s. If he could just get a good look…

“It seems I was being quite offensive without realizing it.”

“Me, too.”

Perv and Beatrix both apologize, and things settle down a bit. Now everyone will think Beatrix’s verbal gaffe had been a reference to Perv himself.

Perv desperately wants to get off the topic of the smell.

He never imagined Beatrix would show up at the Bushin Festival, though.

And today of all days…

He quietly clicks his tongue.

“King Midgar, I trust you’re well today?”

“Oh, very.”

Perv changes his tone and offers salutations to King Midgar, who’s sitting atop a large throne placed among the deluxe suite’s seats.

After exchanging a set of standard greetings, King Oriana sits down beside King Midgar. Perv takes the next seat down and turns his attention to covering King Oriana’s conversational back.

The king can answer simple questions, but anything more complex will give him trouble. Perv has no choice but to guide the conversation and prevent King Oriana from screwing up.

That said, everything has gone according to plan so far.

His primary objective is securing Rose.

During their last encounter, she was already starting to show symptoms. Her blood would undoubtedly prove a valuable asset to the Cult.

In order to ensure he gets her, he made a point of properly incentivizing her.

Specifically, he threatened to have King Oriana kill King Midgar if Rose doesn’t show up at the Bushin Festival.

It was just a threat, of course, but Perv wouldn’t particularly mind following through with it.

King Midgar’s death would incite a war, and the Oriana Kingdom would be finished. However, they already had plans underway to install a puppet

leader in Midgar afterward. If all went well, everything would fall into his lap. There was a risk of abject failure, sure, but the potential rewards were worth it.

The only thing that made him feel uneasy was the fact that Iris was there. Perv could see she distrusted the hollow King Oriana. There was a chance she'd be able to stop him.

However, he could easily remove that threat by simply conducting the assassination during Iris's match. There shouldn't have been any additional impediments.

But now Beatrix is here. Getting rid of her will be tough, and she's probably even stronger than Iris. If Beatrix tries to stop him, she'll be a greater obstacle than Iris.

Also, he still doesn't know what Mundane is after. Mundane is undoubtedly a denizen of the underworld, meaning he must have some objective. No matter how hard Perv searches, though, he keeps coming up blank. This guy's a pro. Perv needs to be on high alert.

He lets out a heavy sigh.

Everything's going according to plan, but there are too many variables. He doesn't feel remotely at ease.

Still, if Rose just shows up, everything's golden. He won't need to take any risks.

And she's sure to. She can't just abandon her homeland and her father. Perv knows her well enough to be certain of that.

True, there are a bunch of variables, but none of them matter. Everything's going to be fine.

Perv keeps telling himself that as he shifts his focus to the match.

Time passes, and Claire Kagenou wins her bout handily.

"Oh-ho…"

He hadn't taken much notice of her before, but it turns out she's unexpectedly skilled. Her magic is powerful, yet she doesn't let it control her.

As strong as she is now, she has the potential to become even stronger.

"It would seem…that Claire's gotten better." After watching Claire take down her opponent, Iris stands from her seat. "My match is starting, so I'm afraid I must be off."

Everyone around her offers words of encouragement, and the dark-haired boy sitting next to her stands as well.

"I gotta hit the can."

Nobody much cares about his comings and goings. Well, nobody except Beatrix, who watches as he leaves.

His name is Cid, and he's utterly unremarkable. Perv was a little curious how he ended up sitting next to the princess, but other than that, he doesn't see much reason to care. He immediately forgets about Cid and turns his attention to the next round.

Iris and Mundane's bout is a very important one for Perv.

He needs to figure out Mundane's strength and agenda as well as take advantage of the opportunity Iris's absence poses.

After the two of them leave, a little time passes…and Iris and Mundane take the stage.

When Iris arrives on the field, she's greeted with a thunderous round of applause.

Her popularity makes it abundantly clear which one of the pair is the tournament's protagonist.

She stares at Mundane and composes herself.

Mundane Mann is obviously going to be a fierce opponent. Even now that she's standing across from him, she can't get a read on his strength but senses something unfathomable lurking within him. His appearance is out of sync with his actual ability. It makes him seem irregular, like he's hiding his true nature.

However, Iris still is confident she can prevail. She has no other choice.

She believes it's her duty to win the Bushin Festival.

She isn't skilled at politics, and she herself knows that. The only thing she can do for Midgar is act as a symbol of its strength.

It's her duty to instill faith in people that as long as Iris Midgar is around, the kingdom will be safe.

Even if that means letting herself be carried on the shoulders of others. She's at peace with that. Her strength is her only asset, and she was content letting herself be used as a political pawn.

Until recently, that is.

That was a price she paid for being carried by others for so long: She stumbled the first time she tried to stand on her own two feet. Fearing for her country's future, she'd tried to assemble the Crimson Order but found herself powerless, unable to secure personnel or funds.

If she tried gathering members gradually, it would take ages before the Crimson Order lived up to her expectations.

Even if she attempted to involve herself in politics, people would still just treat her with superficial respect while using her for their own ends. That's why she's opted to leave the politics to others and gather strength in areas in which she's more skilled.

For example, she knows that popularity among the masses is a strength in and of itself. She's also gathered allies she trusts to be the brains behind her Order. All that's left to do is win the Bushin Festival and solidify the people's love for her, and she's sure things will turn out well.

With that belief firm in her heart, she readies her sword and waits for the announcer.

Her condolences to Mundane, but she plans on going all out from the get-go. Even if he does have something up his sleeve, she intends to end the match before he has time to pull it out.

“Iris Midgar versus Mundane Mann!! Ready? Begin!!”

She wastes no time.

As soon as the match starts, she steps forward, then stops.

“…What?”

A tiny cry of confusion slips from her lips.

For some reason, Mundane seems farther away than he did before.

Has she misjudged the distance between them?

That’s her first thought, but she knows she didn’t. Still, it feels like the gap between them has widened.

She doesn’t know why. Maybe it’s just nerves.

Whatever the cause of her confusion, though, it definitely stops her.

She tries starting over.

She resets her emotions, readies her sword, and goes for a simple feint.

When she’s sure she’s drawn Mundane’s gaze, she rushes him.

However…

“…?!”

Once again, she stops in her tracks.

She leans backward as though dodging something, then leaps back.

She had seen a sword.

She had seen Mundane’s sword severing her neck.

However, Mundane’s actual sword hadn’t moved an inch.

And of course, her neck was still attached to her shoulders.

“Why…?” Iris can’t keep the question inside.

She’s sure she saw Mundane’s blade.

The moment she advanced, she saw his sword and the colossal power lurking within it cutting her throat.

She thought he’d read her like a book. And she’d seen her own defeat… no, her death.

However, Mundane is still just standing there. His sword isn’t even at the ready. It’s as though it had all been just an illusion.

She can’t comprehend what just happened.

Iris slowly paces around him, trying to figure out what’s up with his sword.

One lap, two laps, three laps…

They’re the exact same distance from each other as before. So why does Mundane look so far away?

“…Aren’t you coming?” Mundane asks.

Yet she can’t take that step.

Every bone in her body is screaming for her not to go.

“Hrrraaaaahhhhhhh!!”

She roars in an attempt to dispel her hesitation.

After rocking back and forth, she puts one foot forward. It's the fastest step she's ever taken.

But—he's looking at her!!

Unblinking, Mundane's eyes are trained on her.

His gaze shifts, as though implying something.

"…Aahhhhhhh!!"

The moment it does, Iris's instincts force her to stop.

Doing so places a massive strain on her body, and her knee joints make an unpleasant noise.

She stops in spite of that, then practically tumbles backward.

She's certain she just saw Mundane's sword running her through.

"No…"

However, her chest doesn't have a scratch.

There's no sign Mundane's weapon ever moved.

"You're kidding…"

He's still just standing there, not even bothering to put up a defense.

"…What's wrong?" he asks.

Faced with something unknowable, Iris's body shudders.

She has to do something.

Unease and fear swirl up inside her.

Mundane's gaze shifts again.

As he stares straight ahead, the tip of his sword twitches as though he's predicting the future.

The moment it does, Iris envisions her arm getting lopped off.

"Oh no…"

Now she finally realizes.

Mundane had simply been making feints.

He understood her movements in their entirety, then used his eyes and minute movements of the tip of his sword to send her a warning.

If you don't stop, you'll get cut, he'd been telling her.

That had been enough to make her hallucinate.

That's how real the illusion had been.

Iris recalls something her mentor once taught her: *"An expert's 'lies' seem all too real."* And sure enough, she'd fallen for her mentor's feints time and time again.

Mundane's moves felt even realer than her mentor's.

Was that even possible?

Iris isn't conceited enough to think she's the strongest person in the world. She understands that greatness is relative. Objectively speaking, though, she's supposed to be one of the best dark knights alive.

To be able to drive a woman like her into a corner with feints alone?

That would make Mundane, without a doubt, the world's strongest fighter.

It would represent a degree of skill no one could hope to match.

Was that really possible?

Like hell it was.

Iris forces herself to believe that.

Don't get rattled.

He hasn't even raised his sword yet. Don't go deciding the match on mere speculation.

"…Don't stop me," Iris quietly instructs her instincts.

After steeling her resolve not to stop, she takes that one step forward.

Something whizzes through the air.

A second passes.

Then, a fierce impact rocks Iris's body.

Her mind goes blank for a few seconds, and before she knows it, she's looking up at the sky.

She's collapsed faceup in the dead center of the arena.

What happened?

She had been unable to see Mundane's blade, but he'd caught her in his gaze the moment the impact landed.

It's a miracle she's still holding on to her sword.

She forces her unresponsive torso to rise.

"Iris Midgar…I expected more from you."

She finds a sword being thrust into her face.

Mundane is looking down at her. She can't detect any emotion in his eyes.

They're close enough that she could reach out and touch him, yet he seems impossibly far away.

Far, far away…

Ah…so that's what it is.

Iris finally understands.

The reason he looks so far away isn't because of an illusion or a hallucination.

From the very start, he's been looking down on her from the pinnacle of heights. Even if she extends her entire hand, he's standing eternally beyond her reach…

Iris's sword falls from her grip and topples to the ground with a *clang*.

The noise echoes throughout the silent stadium.

Iris Midgar is defeated in a single blow.

The fact of it has everyone frozen in shock.

Not a sound can be heard.

That is, until the *click, click, click* of footsteps rings out from behind her.

The stadium begins to stir.

The footsteps continue forward. *Click, click, click.* Then, they come to a stop.

The audience's eyes are glued to the person walking.

Even Mundane looks a little surprised.

"Father, I've returned."

There stands the Oriana Kingdom's beautiful princess, Rose Oriana.

Rose doesn’t spare a glance for Iris and Mundane. Her honey-colored eyes are glued to the deluxe suite.

The legendary Iris Midgar was beaten by a single sword stroke.

That simple fact stupefies Perv.

He knows members of the underworld more skilled than her, but could even the strongest dark knight with whom he is familiar really bring Iris Midgar down in a single swing?

No.

Unless they caught her by surprise or got incredibly lucky, there was no way.

In other words, something unthinkable just happened.

Because Mundane took out Iris with one attack, it means *he’s* the strongest dark knight Perv knows of.

But he’s practically a child…!

Nothing wounds Perv’s pride as much as getting overtaken by someone he considered below him.

The astonishment in his heart is quickly painted over with fiery envy.

His brain races to reject Mundane.

Mundane’s one-hit takedown of Iris must have been dumb luck. Even if it wasn’t, it probably has to do with their compatibility in combat. Iris just happened to be a good match for Mundane, that’s all.

Iris’s strange behavior gives him cause for doubt, too. She stopped all of a sudden as though wary of something, and she paced around Mundane for seemingly no reason. Perhaps she’s been under the weather, or maybe Mundane took advantage of some weakness.

There are plenty of ways he can deny Mundane’s strength.

And yet…

Perv found Mundane’s swordplay daunting.

He realizes that he and Mundane see the world through different lenses.

Their assessment and approach to combat are fundamentally different. Perv knows he could spend centuries training and never be able to catch up with that boy. That’s how polished Mundane’s swordplay is. It’s like he’s kneaded together the best parts of countless other martial arts and refined them into a single, incomparable masterpiece.

As Perv tries to disavow Mundane’s mastery, his heart is filled with the innocent admiration of a child.

Mundane’s sword style has a devilish charm that draws Perv. It’s like how he was captivated by his instructor’s sword work as a boy.

He grinds his teeth.

He refuses to accept this.

He can’t be sure this boy’s skills reign supreme just yet.

Perv is no stranger to masters. However, he still hasn't met the Cult's leadership.

Mundane can't possibly be the strongest.

"What did you think of the fight, Beatrix?" he asks, hoping to hear her denounce him.

The blue eyes peeking out from within her robe are fixed on the boy. The look in them…is one of wonder.

"…I want to fight him."

"What?"

Just as Perv is about to ask for clarification, though, a stir runs through the crowd.

He turns to look at the arena, and there, he sees…

"Rose Oriana…"

His mouth curls up into a sneer.

She's come.

What a stupid girl. The king and kingdom are beyond saving. The puppet king is no more than a shell, and thanks to that, they control the country's leader. Showing up here without even realizing that fact reveals a naïveté unbefitting a princess.

Covering his mouth so his twisted grin won't be noticed, Perv steps forward with King Oriana in tow.

"My dear Princess Rose. I see you've decided to return."

There's a long staircase leading straight from the deluxe suite to the arena. Perv and King Oriana start descending it.

"Rose, I'm so glad you're back. Come up here." On Perv's instructions, King Oriana speaks. His words are hollow and lifeless.

As Perv descends, he issues orders to his men with a glance, telling them to be ready to capture Rose.

The princess begins ascending.

"Father, I've come to apologize. For everything I've done and for what I'm about to do… I've made many mistakes, and I'm sure I'll make many more. But as the princess of Oriana, and as your daughter…I'm walking down a path I believe in."

Rose's voice is trembling. Her eyes are moist with tears.

But they're still filled with resolve.

Seeing that, Perv takes a step back.

He should send in the king first.

If he uses the king as a shield, the girl will be powerless.

As long as he has his puppet king, his plan can succeed without a hitch.

"I forgive you for your sins," replies King Oriana, but Perv hadn't told him to say that.

"Thank you, Father."

Afterward, everything happens in a flash.

Rose draws her blade, and Perv reacts by hiding behind the king.

His men make their move.

Rose is too fast for them, though.

Perv's eyes widen in shock.

"Wh—?!"

Abandoning everything, the girl stabs King Oriana through the heart with her rapier.

"As the princess, and as your daughter…this will be my final responsibility."

The king had been reaching out as though to embrace Rose, but halfway through, his hand slumps lifelessly in the air. The rapier passes cleanly through his heart and into Perv's chest.

"Thank you for everything."

She wrenches the rapier free.

Blood gushes from the king's heart as he topples to the ground.

Tears burst from Rose's eyes.

"H-how dare youuuu!!" Perv screeches.

Blood pours from Perv's chest, too, but his wound isn't lethal.

His rage stems from the loss of his puppet. His whole plan—in ruins.

"Get herrrrrrrr!!"

His men charge at Rose.

She doesn't attempt to flee.

As Perv watches her place the tip of her rapier against her throat, he smiles.

She won't really—

His face goes pale.

"No! No! NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

But just as Rose is about to pierce her neck…

"—So that's the choice you've made."

A beautiful, almost artistic flash cleaves through the air, slicing through both Rose's rapier and the swords of the men bearing down on her.

Standing there is Mundane, the most unassuming of men.

"Y-you're…"

However, the sword he's holding is as black as night.

The Eminence in Shadow

onestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as
g as I can remember.
s it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
stermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
aracters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role
hind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
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long as I can remember.
Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a
mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These
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behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the
affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows.
I wanted to be one of them.
Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

Just Who Is This
Mysterious Badass?!

Final Chapter

Final Chapter

Just Who Is This Mysterious Badass?!

Until she saw that beautiful arc, Rose had been prepared to die. If she was captured and turned into a pawn, her father's death would have been in vain. She wasn't going to let that happen.

Death is petrifying.

However, it was the only option she had left. She'd been allowed her indulgences as a princess, but she still intended to carry out her royal duties.

This was to be her final task.

She'd been prepared for that.

"Y-you're…"

However, the instant she sees that boy beautifully cleave through everything, she's reminded of a memory from her childhood.

"The time for lies is over…"

And with that, Mundane rips off his face.

The crowd stirs.

Beneath Mundane's skin sits an all-too-familiar mask.

Black liquid swirls and spirals around him.

When the spiral subsides, it leaves a man wearing a jet-black long coat in its wake.

"Shadow…," someone murmurs.

But to Rose, he isn't Shadow.

He's the man who made her want to take up the sword. The one whose blade embodies beauty.

"Shadow, are you…? Are you the Slayer?"

The memories flash through Rose's mind.

Once, long ago, Rose was kidnapped.

Her father had official business to attend to in Midgar, and she'd secretly snuck out of their inn to play outside. As she was playing with the commoner kids, though, everything suddenly went black.

Then, she passed out.

When she came to her senses, she found herself confined in a small, dark room.

Her hands and legs were bound with rope, and there was a gag stuffed in her mouth.

Although she was outwardly free of injury, her body trembled from worry and fear.

She could hear bandits talking in the room next door. "Man, I knew her clothes looked nice, but we got us the princess here!"

They'd probably figured it out from her personal effects. Now they knew who she was.

"You did it again, boss! We hit the jackpot!"

"This wasn't luck, dumbass! This was all skill!!"

Crude laughter echoed out.

Terrified for her safety, Rose fell into despair. The bandits had two options: They could either use her as a hostage to bargain with Oriana, or they could sell her to someone who knew what she was worth.

She was certain they'd pick the latter. Although she was valuable as a hostage, mere bandits would be hard-pressed to use her right.

By selling her, they could make some easy gold. Then, she would end up falling into the hands of political enemies…

That prospect terrified her.

She twisted her body to try and undo the ropes.

She shouted through her gag.

But her efforts were for nothing.

"Hey, sounds like the princess is up."

"Go check on her, then."

She could hear footsteps drawing closer. Her muffled shouts turned to screams as tears began running down her cheeks.

But just as the door was about to open…

"Yahoo!! Gimme all your money!!"

She heard a child's voice saying some rather unchildish things.

"Wh-who the hell is this kid?!"

"He just showed up outta nowhere! Kill his ass!!"

"C'mere, you!!"

Something made a sound as if it had sliced through the air.

A scream rang out.

“Wh-who the hell is this?! He’s too strong!!”

“What?! He took out three people at once?!”

“You guys can help me practice my fancy swordplay.”

Something ripped through the air again.

Rose could smell blood. She timidly peeked through the crack in the door.

Outside, there was a boy wearing a sack over his head and a group of bandits fleeing.

“If you run, you’re just bandits! But if you don’t, that means you’re *trained* bandits!!”

“Ah, ahhhhh!”

“P-please—!!”

The sack-clad boy swung his sword.

“…?!”

The arc was so beautiful that Rose forgot what was going on and simply stared at it.

She didn’t know much about swords, but that technique…was far more beautiful than any work of art.

The blade sliced skillfully through the bandits’ necks, and the screaming stopped.

Dumbfounded, Rose just gazed at the boy with the sack.

“Man, I came all the way out here, and they don’t have any gold. Huh? Oh, there’s more of them.”

Noticing Rose’s gaze, the boy in the sack opened up the door.

Light streamed into the room as their eyes met.

“Ah, a kidnapped kid. Rough day for you, huh?”

The sack boy swung his sword. Rose was captivated by the elegance of his sword work.

“Bye now. Take care on your way home.”

The sack boy began briskly walking off.

Before she noticed, Rose’s bindings had been cut.

She called out to him in desperation. “W-wait!”

“Hmm?” The boy stopped and turned back toward her.

“Wh-who are you?”

“Me? Hmm. I’m still in the middle of my training, so…just think of me as a fancy bandit slayer who happened to pass by.”

“The Fancy Bandit Slayer… Um, I want to thank you somehow.”

“Uh… All right, well, then I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone about me.”

“O-okay, I won’t.”

“Cool, I’m counting on ya.”

And with that, the Fancy Bandit Slayer vanished.

“The Fancy Bandit Slayer…”

He had saved her from the depths of despair and, in doing so, changed her very life. Out of admiration for the beauty of his swordplay and the way he lived his life, Rose took up the sword that very day.

It's a precious memory of her childhood, one that she's never told anyone. It's Rose's little secret.

In that moment, though, she gives voice to that secret for the first time.

"Shadow…you're the Fancy Bandit Slayer, aren't you?"

Shadow doesn't answer.

But to Rose, his silence is answer enough.

Ever since he was a child, he's fought tirelessly against evil. He's been saving people behind the scenes this whole time, just like he once saved Rose.

Shadow's words run through Rose's mind. If true strength comes not from power but from the way one lives their life…then Shadow must be strength incarnate.

Rose feels ashamed at having chosen death so readily.

She could still have fought, but living is painful, and failure is terrifying. She wanted to put an end to it all.

She had sought refuge in death.

But she could still fight…because she admired his beautiful swordplay and his way of life.

"Your battle is yet unfinished…" Shadow thrusts his jet-black sword forward.

It impales the stadium's wall and creates a large hole.

"Go…"

"Got it!"

Rose scoops up her rapier and leaps without hesitation through the opening. She still has things she needs to do.

"S-stop her!!"

"No one else goes through…"

Shadow plants himself in front of the hole.

Thick clouds roll in at some point and obscure the sun, blanketing the stadium in shadows.

Thunderclaps echo within the clouds.

Drop by drop, rain begins to fall.

"What are you waiting for?! After her!!" bellows Perv, and his men burst into action.

They move to surround the hole's guard, Shadow, then leap at him in unison.

The moment they do, an obsidian arc cleaves through them.

A single blow is all it takes to send all of Perv's handpicked dark knights flying.

"This can't…"

So this is Shadow. True to the rumors Perv heard, he cannot be contained by the riffraff.

He presses down on his bleeding gut and falls back.

"H-help! Is there anyone?! Anyone who can take him down?!" he cries.

The only response he hears is the sound of the rain.

The knights of Midgar surround Shadow from a distance, but that's all.

There isn't a single person present who plans on making light of the man who defeated Iris.

The rain is now a bona fide deluge. Massive droplets cascade from the skies.

The lightning reflects off Shadow's drenched long coat.

Each time it strikes, his figure is illuminated amid the gloom.

"I will go."

As the gray-robed woman speaks, she leaps into the air.

She casts her robe off while airborne and lands with her longsword drawn.

"Beatrix the War Goddess…," someone murmurs.

The beautiful blond elf readies her blade in the rain.

She's wearing nothing more than a loincloth and a breastplate, and the lightning makes her pale, drenched skin flash.

Shadow and Beatrix silently gauge the distance between themselves as they square off.

A violent thunderclap underscores the commencement of their battle.

Shadow stretches out his obsidian katana to match Beatrix's longsword.

He slashes.

His black blade cleaves through the air.

The rain parts.

For a brief instant, a trail of empty, rainless air follows in his sword's wake.

He misses.

"Oh…?"

Beatrix reacts instantly by taking a half step back to dodge Shadow's strike.

Then, she counters. Her deadly thrust bears down on Shadow.

Beneath his mask, Shadow grins.

He evades the attack by leaning to the side, then swings his sword as he pulls back upright.

But she recovers quickly, too.

As she retracts her longsword, she stoops low to avoid Shadow's blow.

Then, she counters once more.

The only thing either of them hits is the rain.

Slashes fly through the air, each rending a path through the downpour.

The droplets spread in little splashes as they're sliced aside, casting beautiful streaks as the lightning illuminates them.

Everyone in the stands holds their breath as they watch the battle unfold.

It's like watching a dance.

The rain and the lightning leave etchings in the sky of a battle that no normal eyes can follow.

It's a beautiful sword dance.

It's plain to see that the two combatants stand at the apex of swordsmanship.

The spectators want the dance to last forever, but Shadow brings it to an end.

"It seems this sword cannot reach you…"

He puts some distance between them, then stares at Beatrix.

Beatrix doesn't chase him down, instead choosing to steady her breathing. Her chest heaves up and down.

"Incredible…" She lets out the word of admiration as one would a sigh.

Her blue eyes are fixed on Shadow. For a moment, they just stare at each other.

"Allow me to show you my *true* blade."

With that, Shadow returns his black sword to its original length.

This is his preferred distance.

"Here I come."

As soon as he speaks, he instantly steps forward.

The field between them vanishes.

"…?!"

Then the impact.

The moment he closes the gap, Beatrix immediately abandons attacking and shifts all her focus to defense. However, she can't even see his sword.

It's not just her. Nobody can.

And his assault doesn't cut so much as a single raindrop.

"—Rgh!!"

The impact sends her flying, and she collapses in the rain.

She can't see the blow but manages to block it on instinct alone. But only barely. She ends up sprawled unceremoniously on the ground, unable to mount a counterattack.

She promptly rises to her feet, preparing herself to pursue.

The thunder roars, and as the lightning flashes, Shadow disappears.

In that one instant, he's right in front of her again.

He swings his imperceptible blade.

Beatrix focuses every cell in her body on Shadow's sword, then finds herself besieged again.

“—!!”

She can’t see it.

Ignoring the mud caked on her face, she stands back up and leaps away to put some distance between them.

Instinct and luck are the only things that let her narrowly deflect the strike.

She has no reason to believe she can fend off the next one.

No follow-up comes.

As she looks at Shadow readying his blade beneath the lightning, she thinks, *Why can’t I see it?*

It’s not just that he’s fast. There’s something off about his sword.

After searching her memories of a lifetime of battles, she finds the answer.

Shadow’s techniques are natural.

Of the many types of swordplay in battle, fast swords are certainly menacing. However, even a quick swing starts with some preliminary action. Even if it doesn’t, you can still tell when the attack will land with enough experience. As long as you’re conscious, you can react to it.

No, the most dangerous type of attack is the kind that comes from outside your perception. It doesn’t need to be fast. You just need to be unaware of it.

And Shadow’s performance is natural.

There’s no bloodlust, no hesitation, no swagger. His swings are just… natural.

And people can’t pick them out.

Just like she isn’t actively conscious of the individual raindrops falling, she isn’t cognizant of Shadow’s sword.

“Incredible…”

Beatrix regards the depth of Shadow’s mastery with utter admiration. His skill lies at the bottom of an abyss nobody else can reach.

She prepares herself for her inevitable defeat.

“Show me your fangs, War Goddess…” Shadow brandishes his ebony blade.

Beatrix knows she can’t block it.

“Wait.” A clear voice interrupts their battle. “I, too, will join the fray.”

Iris stands there with her sword drawn.

“Princess Iris…”

Beatrix looks at Iris as though she wants to say something.

“I know. I know I’m not strong enough…” Iris smiles to hide her frustration. “But I won’t back down. I’m not going to stand by and let him flee after laying waste to the Bushin Festival. I have my pride, and so does Midgar…”

She glares at Shadow.

“I’ll stop him from moving, even if it costs me my life. When I do, Beatrix, use that to bring him down.”

“…Understood. I’ll follow your lead.”

Beatrix sympathizes with Iris’s resolve.

Fire burns in their eyes as they square off against Shadow.

“Come, then… Show me your fangs.” Shadow lowers the tip of his sword and assumes a defensive posture.

As Iris waits for an opportunity, she slowly closes the gap.

For a little while, the only sounds are the rain and the thunder.

“Please let me land a blow.”

A massive thunderclap rings out, and Iris makes her move.

She charges forward, aiming for Shadow’s neck with her longsword.

However, all it takes for Shadow to escape her range is to take a half step backward. He watches the attack miss and turns his attention to Iris’s next move.

But Iris’s sword extends.

By letting go of it, she forcibly lengthens its range.

Shadow immediately shifts gears. He abandons his attempt at a counterattack and instead knocks Iris’s sword aside.

Her offense is ruined. That’s what anyone would think.

However, she stoops down and uses the momentum from her charge to grab Shadow’s torso and grapple him.

It’s a valiant move, one designed to restrain his movements in exchange for her own life.

He won’t be able to evade in time.

“Bravo.”

Shadow’s knee smashes into Iris’s face.

There’s no way she could have known, but hand-to-hand combat is Shadow’s specialty.

Iris crumples to the ground.

However, she still achieves her mission.

When he lashes out with his knee, there is a brief moment when Shadow becomes immobile.

That one moment is all she needs.

“Hyah!!”

Beatrix’s slash bears down on him. She pours all her strength into her longsword and slams it into his ebony blade.

A thunderous noise explodes as Shadow’s katana, hand, and arm are sent reeling backward.

His posture is shot.

This is her chance.

Beatrix’s follow-up is impossibly fast.

But Shadow releases his sword faster.

He makes the split-second decision to cast aside his weapon, then vanishes.

He’s outside Beatrix’s vision.

“Is he below me?!”

After leaning forward so low he's practically crawling, he grabs Beatrix by the waist. However, his movements are miles more polished and flowing than when Iris attempted the same move.

He's too close for her longsword to connect.

Shadow hoists Beatrix up with ease, then slams her into the ground.

"Gah!!"

The stone floor shatters.

The air in her lungs is forcibly expelled.

But in that split second, she has a chance to use her sword.

As her consciousness wavers, she swings it.

Shadow pays her no heed, instead lifting her up and slamming her down again—but halfway through, he lets go.

Beatrix's sword meets empty air, and she crashes hard into the stadium wall.

A sickening noise resounds as her body is embedded in it.

Then, a slice cuts through the air as something pitches down from the sky.

Shadow reaches out and grabs it—his ebony sword.

It's as though he planned it all out…

Lightning illuminates the bodies of the two downed women.

Even together, Beatrix and Iris are helpless. The shock of that overwhelms the spectators with confusion and fear.

"…It's over."

Shadow looks down at his two opponents, then turns to leave.

"S-stop right there…"

He hears a voice and stops.

"I…I can still fight…"

Iris staggers to her feet.

Beatrix follows her lead, brushing away the debris from the wall as she rises in turn. "As can I…"

The two swordswomen rise.

However, Shadow merely casts a glance at them before walking off again.

"Stop right there! Are you going to flee?!"

Hearing Iris, Shadow stops. "*…Flee?*" he repeats.

Bluish-purple light fills the stadium.

"Wh—?!"

"…!!"

It's a torrent of magic, whirling as it floods out of Shadow's body.

Swallowed up by the magic, the rain stops.

"This can't… Is this even real…?!"

"This is…impossible."

The unimaginable force stops Iris and Beatrix in their tracks.

With power like this, annihilating the entire stadium would have been trivial for him.

Iris, Beatrix, and the spectators are all equally helpless in the face of such might.

“Why would I need to flee…?”

Nobody can possibly stop him. They have no choice but to acknowledge that.

“Why…?” asks Iris, her voice shaking. “If you had all that power…you could have killed us whenever you wanted.”

“…I achieved my objective. I have no interest in your lives… The only ones we butcher are our enemies…”

Shadow looks at Iris as he makes his magic converge on his sword.

“Make sure you remember…who your true enemy is.”

With that, Shadow releases the energy into the sky.

A blinding light floods the stadium and spreads out across the entire capital as it blots out the heavens and blasts away the rain clouds.

When it fades, all that’s left is a clear blue sky.

Shadow is nowhere to be seen.

The clouds, the rain, the lightning, and Shadow himself… It’s like they were never even there.

“Remember who my true enemy is…? Shadow. Who are you…?”

Iris gazes up at the cloudless sky as she ruminates on the words with which Shadow left her.

What was his objective…? Who was her true enemy…?

Far up above, a massive rainbow stretches across the firmament.

Rose runs through the rain.

She has no destination in mind. She just keeps running, and before she notices, the rain stops.

She’s in a forest.

Sunlight streams through the gaps in the dampened trees.

Rose collapses against a trunk and catches her breath.

All sorts of thoughts are racing through her head. She thinks about her father, about her homeland, about what’s going to happen to her now…

All of those worries and more get tangled up inside her, sending her heart into disarray.

She may have had her reasons, but that doesn’t change the fact that she’s now a criminal guilty of murdering a king. She isn’t going to deny that, and she has no intention of seeking death to flee responsibility.

She fully intends to shoulder the burden of committing patricide alongside her duties as a princess.

But it’s all too much for her.

The more she thinks, the more the anxiety makes her shiver.

The weight of her responsibilities is crushing her resolve.

She can still fight. She *has* to fight. But what can a frail seventeen-year-old girl really hope to accomplish…?

She buries her head in her knees.

Then, she curls into a ball and trembles.

She stays that way until the sunlight takes on the vermilion hue of twilight.

At that point, she tells herself it's time to go and stands.

She doesn't know where she's going, but she knows she has to press on.

Right when she faces forward and starts walking, a lovely voice calls out from behind her.

"You have two choices you can make."

"?!" Rose whirls around and finds an elf wearing a jet-black dress.

She has blond hair, blue eyes, and features so elegant they could have been chiseled from stone.

"You're…Alpha…"

Alpha crosses her arms and smiles mysteriously.

"You can fight alone, or you can fight with us. But you have to choose."

"With you…?"

Rose's enemy and the Shadow Garden's enemy are one and the same.

However, having the same foe is no guarantee they'll be able to work together.

Still, it's true she's short on options.

People will be after her soon. If she's going to fight alone, she needs somewhere to hide. For now, her only option on that front is taking refuge in the mountains… Well, she could also head for the Lawless City, she supposes.

But in this moment, she's the criminal who murdered King Oriana. If she goes to the Lawless City, people will come seeking the bounty on her head.

"Can you save the Oriana Kingdom?"

"That depends on you. Right now, we have no reason to act on your behalf. If you want to save your country, you'll need to prove your worth."

"My worth…?"

"Your worth…and the Oriana Kingdom's worth…"

"And if I prove those, can you save it…?"

"It's within our means."

Alpha's reply is succinct. All she's doing is presenting Rose with her choices.

She's neither giving Rose advice nor offering her aid.

The decision is Rose's to make.

"…Is the Slayer…I mean, Shadow the leader of your organization?"

"…He is."

An image of the boy who saved her as a child and tirelessly fought evil flashes through her mind.

She decides to believe in him.

"…Then my blade is yours."

“I see. Welcome aboard. Now follow me.”

There’s no emotion in Alpha’s voice as she leads Rose deeper into the forest.

“Can I ask you a question?” asks Rose as she follows her.

“You may.”

“Who exactly is Shadow…?”

He’s a man with an iron will who’s fought evil since he was a child, and he has so much power, he can actually vanquish it. But Rose doesn’t know anything about the secret to his strength, his beliefs, or even his identity. He’s utterly shrouded in mystery.

“If you want to know, you’ll need to earn our trust.”

“Your trust…”

“But if you end up being worthy of it, you’re sure to find out eventually…”

Afterward, the two of them proceed through the forest in silence.

They make their way through a dense fog untouched by the sun’s light.

“Where are we? Is this…?”

“These are the Abyss Woods,” Alpha answers.

Rose has heard the stories. Nobody knows where it is, but rumor has it that anyone who enters can never leave.

Rose can’t even make out Alpha, who’s supposedly right in front of her.

The magic-rich fog that’s almost blue or purple is messing with her senses.

“This fog is caused by a sigh of a dragon…”

“A dragon…”

They were practically a thing of legend. Once in a blue moon, someone would report seeing one, but the records of the most recent dragon hunt were over a century old.

“Long ago, he came to this land and battled the Mist Dragon.”

“…Who’s he?”

“In his youth, he was powerful enough to defeat the dragon, but he couldn’t slay it. So the dragon accepted him and let out the sigh.”

So this fantastical bluish-purple mist was from the dragon…

“By the way, it’s a deadly poison.”

Rose twitches.

“Don’t get too far from me. If you do, you’ll die in a heartbeat.”

“Understood…”

As they trod through the thick fog, the air suddenly clears.

“Wait, this is…”

The sun’s rays beat down upon a venerable white castle.

“This is Alexandria, the ancient capital destroyed by the Mist Dragon. This is our base.”

Alexandria, the old capital. Rose had once seen that name in a book.

But no book could have possibly described its beauty.

Massive fields spread out around the capital, and they’re all full of crops she’s never seen before. Women are enthusiastically harvesting the produce.

“That one there is a cocoa field. It’s the main ingredient in chocolate. We may have you working in it at some point.”

“Wait, chocolate? You mean that Mitsugoshi is part of the Shadow Garden?”

Alpha only smiles.

Currently, Mitsugoshi remains the only place that sells chocolate. Nobody knows anything about the ingredients or manufacturing process.

The two of them pass through the portcullis and enter the castle.

“Is Lambda around?”

“I’m here.”

A woman responds to Alpha’s call and kneels before her.

“We have a new recruit. Train her.”

“As you wish.”

“Start by showing us your strength. I’m sure you’ll be able to forge your path quickly…” After speaking to Rose, Alpha takes her leave.

Rose remains behind with the woman named Lambda.

She’s an elf with dark skin, gray hair, and gold eyes. She’s tall, and her muscles are evident even through her black bodysuit.

Also, her eyes are sharp and her lips are plump.

“I’m Lambda, your instructor. Come.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Rose follows Lambda, and they exit through the rear of the castle.

Many girls are fervently training here.

“Wow…”

All it takes is a single glance for Rose to realize—every single one of them is powerful.

“Number 664, number 665!”

“Present, ma’am!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Two of the women come running at Lambda’s summons.

One is an elf, the other a therianthrope.

“Instructor, you called?” asks the elf, practically shouting. The therianthrope stands at attention beside her.

“This is the new recruit. I’m putting her on your squad.”

“Understood!”

“Number 666, strip.”

“Huh?” Rose doesn’t understand what had just been said to her.

“Number 666 is you. Here, your number is your name.”

“I’m number 666…”

“If you got that, then hurry up and strip.”

“What?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself!”

Immediately, Rose finds her clothes sliced off her body.

It happens in the blink of an eye.

Now she’s buck naked.

“Wh-what are you doing?!” Rose squats down in an attempt to cover herself.

“From today on, you’re the scum of the world. You’re nobody. Discard your name! Abandon your clothes! Throw away everything so you can become the perfect soldier!”

Lambda throws a dark lump at Rose’s feet.

It’s a springy black slime.

“Number 664, teach the worm how to use it!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Hmm? What is this?”

A piece of paper flutters up from the tatters that were once Rose’s clothes.

Instructor Lambda picks it up and holds it in front of Rose.

“That’s…!”

It’s the wrapper from the Tuna King sandwich Cid gave her.

The moment she sees it, all the bottled-up feelings she has for him begin bursting out.

He was her first love.

He’d fought her in the preliminary tournament, saved her life in the terrorist attack, and gone on a journey with her.

She considers each of those memories irreplaceable.

A mere week ago, she’d dreamed of taking his hand in marriage.

But she can’t go back anymore.

Their paths will never cross again.

“What’s with that look? I told you to throw everything away!”

Lambda shreds the paper before Rose’s eyes.

The scraps catch on the wind and soar high up into the sky.

The fragments of a dream that will never come to pass…

Drops of tears begin spilling from Rose’s eyes.

Appendix

Appendix

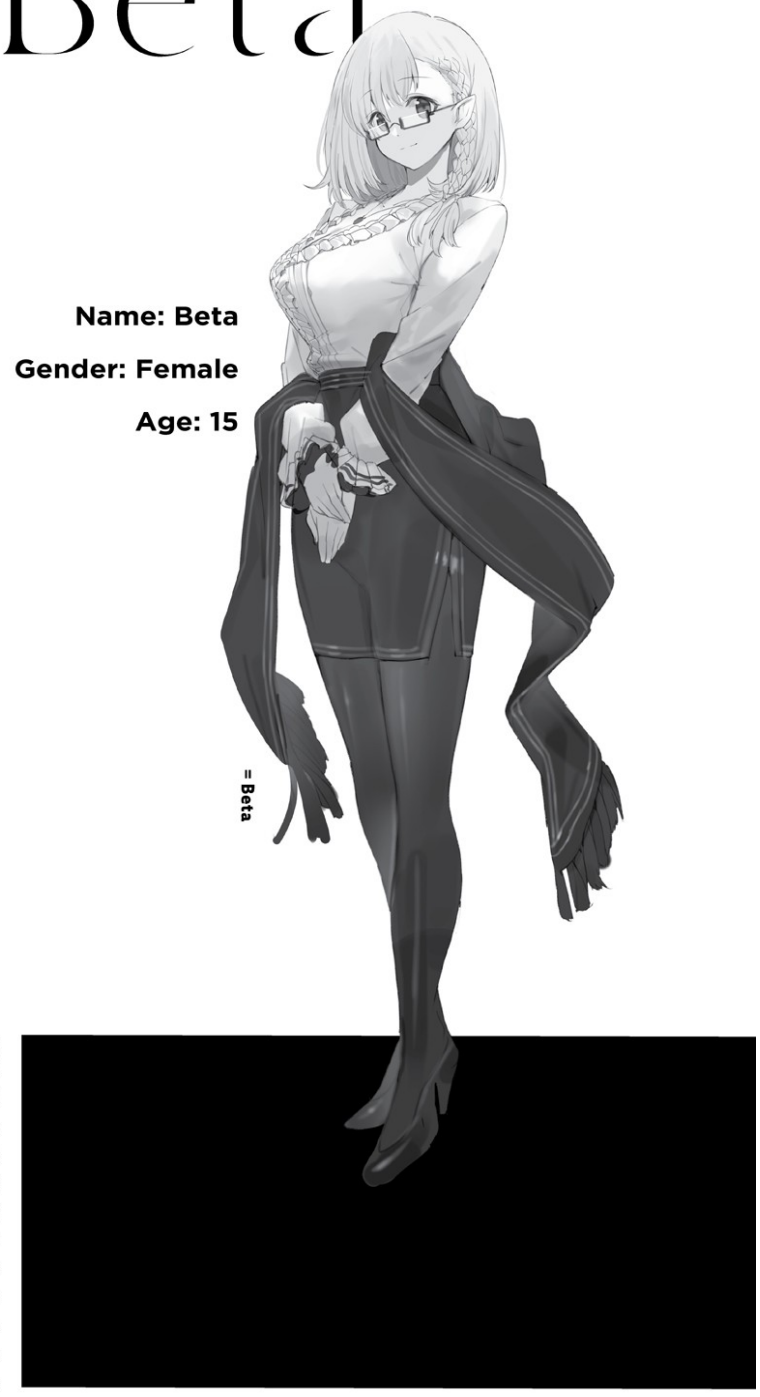
Beta

“The clouds cascade over the moon tonight. How fitting. For us.”

Name: Beta

Gender: Female

Age: 15



= Beta

The second member of the Seven Shadows. More devoted to Shadow than anyone else and considers penning *The Chronicles of Master Shadow* to be her life’s work. Occasionally embellishes and editorializes its content to better suit her tastes. Uses her literary talents to work as an author under the pen name Natsume. Her works include *Romeo and Julietta*, *Asherella*, and *Little Crimson Riding Hood*.

Gamma

= Gamma

Name: Gamma

Gender: Female

Age: 17

"We've waited a long time for you, my lord."

The third member of the Seven Shadows. The brains of the Shadow Garden and the cornerstone of their internal affairs. Known to the world at large as Luna, the president of Mitsugoshi, Ltd. Almost too smart but possesses virtually no hand-eye coordination, making her the least physically adept of the Seven Shadows. Dreams of fighting by Shadow's side, but her efforts are getting her nowhere.

Rose Oriana

"...Let's try to make a happy future a reality."

Name: Rose Oriana

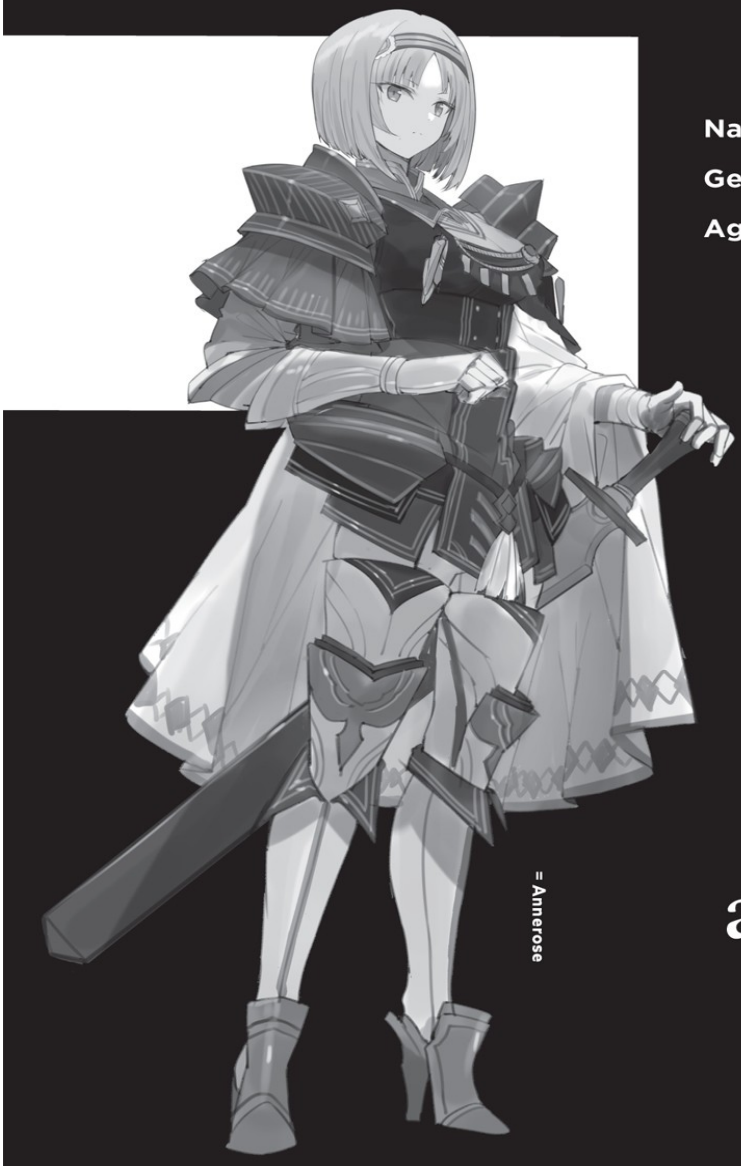
Gender: Female

Age: 17

= Rose Oriana

The princess of the Oriana Kingdom, a land of culture and the arts. Kidnapped as a child and later enrolls in the Midgar Academy for Dark Knights out of admiration for the swordsman who saved her. Serves as student council president and is skilled enough with the rapier to be considered the strongest student in the school. Falls in love with Cid after watching him sacrifice himself to protect her. Daydreams about Cid all day.

Annerose



= Annerose

Name: Annerose

Gender: Female

Age: 21

“I’ll admit it: You’re good.”

A swordswoman from the Velgalta Empire. Formidable enough with the sword to be numbered among Velgalta’s Seven Blades but abandons that position and leaves on a journey to get better. Enters the Bushin Festival to test her skills. Advances through the rounds but loses to Mundane Mann. Admittedly impressed by his skills. Vows to surpass him one day before setting out on her journey once more.

The Chronicles of Master Shadow

Complete Version: Volume II

By Beta

Our story begins when the Shadow Garden got to work, trying to lay bare the secret the Cult of Diablos had hidden in the Sanctuary. At around the same time, Master Shadow sneaked into the Sacred Land while acting as Cid the student at Midgar Academy. Thanks to a fateful encounter with Natsume the novelist, Master Shadow ended up deciding to infiltrate the Sanctuary on his own.

Then, the Goddess's Trial began. It's the one time a year that the door to the Sanctuary opens. As we waited for our chance to slip in, the person descending before us was a gallant swordsman clad in black—Master Shadow himself! As the crowd went wild, the Sanctuary reacted to Master Shadow's presence and summoned an ancient warrior: Aurora the Calamity Witch. No warrior from the annals of history could prove Master Shadow's equal. Aurora was perhaps one of the few who could even come close, but not even she could stand up to him! She crumpled in the face of his all-powerful skills. The other audience members probably found the match anticlimactic, but I could tell just how much high-speed strategy had gone into the fight. How many people in this world could have pulled off that kind of exchange with Master Shadow? I suspect it would have been impossible for me.

Aurora the Calamity Witch was almost one of the keys to unlocking the Sanctuary's mysteries. Having recognized this fact, Master Shadow summoned and defeated Aurora in order to open its door. With his help, we were able to enter the Sanctuary much more easily than we'd anticipated, and within it, we discovered an astonishing truth… Upon learning how dangerous and well protected the Sanctuary was, Alpha ordered us to beat a tactical retreat but swore to eventually cut its power off at the source.

However, all this had been just according to Master Shadow's plan. After secretly invading the Sanctuary's core, he decided to go with the simplest, most effective solution. In other words—he used one powerful attack to wipe the Sanctuary off the face of the planet. He's the only man in the world who could pull off such a feat. We had no choice but to take our hats off to his incredible power and impeccable discernment. The Cult must have been shocked at having lost the Sanctuary in a single night. Maybe their faces even went all red with rage. The members of the Cult are basically brats compared to Master Shadow!!

After the Sanctuary was totally destroyed, the Bushin Festival started up over in Midgar. The Shadow Garden had no plans to interfere with it, as we sensed disquieting presences acting in the Oriana Kingdom and around our firm in the capital. However, Master Shadow elected to hide his true identity and enter the festival. There must have been something only he was able to sense—and it turned out that his hunch was on the mark! Rose Oriana was slated to participate in the tournament, but instead, she stabbed her fiancé and fled. There had

to be some link between her disappearance and the Cult of Diablos. The Cult had to be plotting something at the Bushin Festival.

Guided through the underground tunnels by a beautiful piano composition, Rose Oriana found herself in an abandoned cathedral, and within that wondrously illuminated hall, she found Master Shadow playing the "Moonlight Sonata"! Master Shadow isn't just strong. His intellect and artistic sensibilities are out of this world! After hearing his nigh-divine performance, Rose trembled as she shed tears of joy! Then, Master Shadow healed her illness and guided her along her path. Just like when he saved each of us…

Later, he continued advancing through the Bushin Festival while hiding his true strength. He must have seen through the Cult's plan, waiting for them to make their move. He trounced a former member of Velgalta's Seven Blades, then crushed Iris Midgar, the strongest dark knight in all of Midgar. That was when Rose showed up at the stadium. Before the entire audience, she stabbed her father, King Oriana, with her rapier. We found out after the fact that King Oriana was a puppet of the Cult whom they were planning on using to assassinate King Midgar. Tearing a rift between the two kingdoms and spreading their influence as Midgar went through a succession battle… How very cult-y. But because Rose killed King Oriana, the Cult's plan was ruined. They lost their puppet, King Oriana, and Perv's fiancée, Rose, too. All as Master Shadow planned. Harsh as it was, that thorny path was the one he chose for Rose to take. As if he was trying to say it was the only way to save Oriana…

Then, Master Shadow covered Rose's escape by standing in her pursuers' way. He sliced through Perv's private unit, then crossed swords with Beatrix the War Goddess. In all likelihood, everyone was certain of Beatrix's victory. But Master Shadow's swordplay… It's the best there is. The War Goddess was moved by Master Shadow's swordplay and barely able to put up a resistance before being defeated!! Then, when Master Shadow left, he released an attack that cleared the skies and stopped the rain. Nobody present would forget that scene for as long as they lived. Now you all know! This is what Master Shadow is capable of!!

In the next installment, we'll see a vampire progenitor resurrected in the Lawless City! When a legendary vampire who once shook the world is awoken again, Master Shadow makes his move!!

And tune in to see Mitsugoshi go up against the Major Corporate Alliance!! When the ever-expanding corporation makes a new enemy, Master Shadow ends up controlling everything behind the scenes!!

Get hyped for more of his continued exploits!!

Afterword

Thank you for reading the second volume of *The Eminence in Shadow*.

I wouldn't have been able to release it if it weren't for your support! Thank you all so much.

Some of you may already know this next bit of news, but I'd like to announce it anyway.

The Eminence in Shadow is going to be getting a manga adaptation in *Comp Ace* with art by Anri Sakano.

The manga adaptation does an excellent job supplementing all the parts I couldn't describe well with words. It would make me really happy if you all would check it out.

Now, this doesn't have much to do with anything, but I've been thinking about laser beard removal recently.

My beard isn't unusually thick or anything. In fact, it's probably on the thinner side.

But while it isn't thick enough to actually warrant laser hair removal, when I think about the two minutes spent shaving each day, I begin wondering if I should just get it removed.

Those two minutes might not seem like a lot in the context of one day, but they mean that I waste twelve hours shaving over the course of a year. And if I keep having to shave for another fifty years, that means I'll end up spending six hundred hours shaving. What do you all make of that number?

Honestly, I think it's pretty whatever. I honestly don't care that much about the six hundred hours. I just think shaving is kind of a hassle.

Basically, I'm trying to say that I'm thinking about getting my beard removed soon. I might start off by just getting rid of the unnecessary bits and going for a "designer beard" look so I can cut down on shaving, since I can get away with maintaining it less. I'll see how I feel from there.

I'm getting to the end here, so I'd like to say some words of thanks.

I'd like to thank my editor for helping me through the entire publishing process. I'd like to thank Touzai for the best illustrations I could ever hope for. I'd like to thank Araki at BALCOLONY. for the incredible designs that color this book. And I'd like to thank my readers for their support. Thank you again from the bottom of my heart.

Let's meet again in Volume 3!

Daisuke Aizawa

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

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